

A FORM ANALYSIS OF SERMONS PREACHED
IN SELECTED CONGREGATIONS OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

A Professional Project
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by
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ABSTRACT

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Preaching has, since the advent of Christianity, been considered an integral part of the tradition of the church. For two thousand years writers have suggested types of sermon form that would most effectively transmit the message of the gospel to listening ears. Many writers of the past twenty years have suggested that there is a crisis in preaching today, and that the crisis is evidenced by reduced levels of worship attendance and church membership.

Modern communication theory and research suggest that persons of the late twentieth century listen differently than their forebearers, and thus new models of communication and homiletic form must be proposed. One such new model of homiletic form is the one proposed by David Buttrick, whose theories reveal distinct elements found in the philosophy of phenomenology and the discipline of structuralism.

The design of this project includes a form analysis of sermons preached in churches of the United Church of Christ which have reported a statistically significant increase or decrease in worship attendance. The tool for analysis is a model derived from the theories of Buttrick, whose model of homiletic specifically addresses the three primary requisites of form and the three primary divisions of form that scholars during the past century have indicated are vital to effective preaching. The purpose of such an analysis is to determine whether or not there is an actual difference in form of sermons preached in growing or declining churches. A difference in form would suggest possibilities for improved sermon construction, which could then have a positive effect on

worship attendance. The results of this study, consisting of a sampling of ten preachers from five geographical regions, indicates that there is no form of preaching that is normative to either growing or declining congregations.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1. A Brief Review of the Development of Preaching	1
Background	3
Problem	12
Thesis	15
Scope and Limitations	15
Definition of Terms	16
Methodology	17
2. A Review of Homiletic Form Theory in the Twentieth Century	21
The Purpose and Value of Form	21
The Three Primary Requisites of Form	25
The Three Principal Divisions of Form	35
A Variety of Forms	38
3. The Moves and Structures of David Buttrick	41
The Structuralist Approach	43
The Three Principal Divisions of Form	51
A Critique of Buttrick's Homiletic	65
An Appropriation of Moves and Structures for Sermon Analysis	68
4. An Analysis of Sermons from Churches Reporting an Increase in Worship Attendance	71
Northeast	72
Southeast	74
Midwest	76

Northwest	78
Southwest	81
5. An Analysis of Sermons from Churches Reporting a Decrease in Worship Attendance	85
Northeast I	86
Northeast II	89
Southeast	91
Midwest	94
Northwest	96
6. Conclusions: A Comparison of Results	100
The Three Primary Requisites of Form	102
The Three Principal Divisions of Form	106
Observations for Future Consideration	113
Appendices	
A. First Letter to Participants	117
B. Second Letter to Participants	118
Bibliography	119

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to the people of Scottsdale Congregational United Church of Christ, who picked me up when I was broken, nourished me with love and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and turned me into a real pastor. Truly you live your lives as a people of God, and I will be indebted to you always.

CHAPTER 1

A Brief Review of the Development of Preaching

It is simply a truism that there is nothing more important, more urgent, more helpful, more redemptive and more salutary, there is nothing, from the viewpoint of heaven and earth, more relevant to the real situation than the speaking and the hearing of the word of God....

Karl Barth, Homiletics

The history of the religious tradition known as Christianity is a history of ever-changing composition, constantly evolving, sometimes progressing, oftentimes regressing. Modern Christianity, a complex of systems both developmental and static, stands as the latest evolutionary product of two thousand years of change. The nucleus of this organism known as Christianity is the local church, itself a very complex and multi-faceted organization.

Thus it is that the local church pastor finds him or herself in the midst of an "ever rolling stream." The church of the late twentieth century stands at the nexus of two thousand years of history and tradition, which is in fact the prelude to the next two thousand years of evolution and change. Clearly no one thinks this reality through completely, for if a person did think it through, there would be no one crazy (or stupid) enough to become a local church pastor.

The local church pastor of this last decade of the twentieth century has as his or her responsibility a very simple task: that of being all things to all people. During any given day a pastor might: sit with a bereaved family which seeks to find consolation in the midst of the drug induced death of an adolescent child; talk to the chairperson of the Board of Trustees about the new finance plan that the church is trying to incorporate into its overall management system; or have

an early morning breakfast meeting with the newly formed men's group, sharing coffee and laughter as those men seek to discover who they are in the midst of an ever-changing and too often unforgiving world.

During that same day the pastor might meet with the music staff to outline all the places where music must be incorporated, making sure everybody knows what to do, when to begin, and when to end. Bible Study requires adequate preparation, and so the pastor must also trot out all the notes from seminary and the commentaries gathered at various continuing education events in a effort to prepare to share with lay people the exciting and complex world of the Bible. No doubt sometime during that day the pastor will take half a dozen phone calls, each one vitally important to the one calling, concerning all sorts of things from the mistake in last weeks' bulletin to the upcoming rummage sale and the "Where-do-we-store-all-the-stuff-until-then?" question.

Somewhere, in the midst of all this hustle-bustle and busyness, the pastor must begin to think and prepare for another task - - proclaiming the Word to the congregation, which will gather on Sunday morning to be moved, informed, and inspired. For it is on Sunday morning that the one called, the one robed and somehow set aside, climbs the silver stairs to stand behind the sacred desk and proclaim to those people gathered in fear and hope, in trepidation and anticipation, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

There are hundreds of tasks, both formal and tacit, contained within the role of the modern local church pastor, each task in its own way equally important to the function of the modern church. The pastor plays many roles: pastor as counselor, pastor as administrator, pastor as teacher. This project is concerned with only one of those roles, the pastor as preacher.

Background

Since the day of Pentecost recorded in the second chapter of the Book of Acts, the proclamation of the Word--preaching--has been considered a vital aspect of the worship celebration within the Christian community.

First Century Preaching

The roots of preaching in the church pre-date that day of Pentecost into the actual ministry of Jesus, and, some would argue, are in fact related to the service of worship found in the synagogue of the pre-Christian era,¹ which can be traced back to the time of the prophets, "from whom we really date our modern Christian preaching practices."²

The sermon of the synagogue as developed during the post-exilic period was an instructional exposition of scripture, in a time when "there was no distinction between preaching and teaching."³ Evidence indicates that "teaching" was the actual term used in the synagogue, and that is the term commonly used to refer to the proclamation uttered by Jesus.⁴

Biblical references to the preaching of Jesus are found in all the synoptic gospels. Both Matthew and Mark speak of Jesus traveling around the countryside "proclaiming the good news," and actual examples of his preaching include: the Sermon on the Mount found in Matt. 5-7; the description of his teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum recorded in Mark 1:21-22; the

¹ Yngve Brilioth, A Brief History of Preaching, trans. Karl Mattson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 4-5.

² DeWitte T. Holland, The Preaching Tradition: A Brief History (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 14.

³ Brilioth, 5.

⁴ Brilioth, 5.

parables found in all of the gospels; and the Luke 4:16-22 narrative of Jesus' exposition of Isaiah 61. Clearly, the memory of the preaching of Jesus was important to the early church, since these preaching stories survived the period of oral transmission until such time as they were put into writing by the authors of the gospels.

Likewise, biblical evidence suggests that preaching was important to the apostles: Acts 6:4 records the apostles' commitment "to prayer and to serving the Word," which may have been a direct response to having been sent out by Jesus to "proclaim the message," as recorded in Mark 3:14.

Acts records not only the sermons preached on the day of Pentecost, but also: Stephen's proclamation to the council (7:1-53); the preaching of Philip in Samaria (8:5-8); Peter's sermons to the gentiles of Caesarea (10:34-43); and the preaching of Paul throughout the Roman Empire (13:4-5; 13:13-41; 14:1; 14:24-26; 15:36; 16:1,6-14; 17:1,10; 18:1; 19:1,21; 20:1-21.17; 27:1; 28:1,16). Paul himself declared that people must have someone proclaim the gospel to them (Rom. 10:14), and impressed on Timothy the importance of proclaiming the message (2 Tim. 4:1-2).

Other New Testament evidence for the presence and importance of preaching to the early church is found in the pastoral epistles, portions of which scholars suggest show evidence of expository and catechetical preaching.⁵

Preaching in the Patristic Period

This concern for preaching extended into the post-apostolic, or Patristic, period, as the "task of preaching was an important element in the development of the offices of ministry."⁶ The importance of the presence of preaching has

⁵ Brilioth, 17.

⁶ Brilioth, 19.

continued throughout the history of the church to the present age, leading Clyde Fant to write that preaching "has a longer continuous history of virtually unanimous practice among all groups, Protestant and Catholic, than any other element of . . . worship."⁷

While the sermon has maintained a constant presence in the life of the church, it would be misleading to suggest that preaching has always enjoyed a revered and respected reputation. Scholars interested in the history of preaching agree that, while always present, preaching has nonetheless had a checkered reputation within the life of the church. There have been times when the "practice of preaching was almost non-existent. . . . times when liturgy and sacraments became the focal point of worship, to the detriment of preaching. . . . and there have been times when the church has wielded such political power and has been so satisfied with its position that it felt little need to preach."⁸

A number of well-known preachers emerged during the Patristic period, including Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, and Cyprian; but the preaching of this period clearly reached an apex with Augustine (who wrote De Doctrina Christiana, the first significant work on homiletics) in the fifth century, C.E.⁹ The art of preaching then experienced a severe decline for some five hundred years, as the liturgy and traditions of the church became more important than the proclamation of the Word.¹⁰ There were of course exceptions such as Boniface, Alcuin, and the sermon reform by Charlemagne,

⁷ Clyde Fant, Preaching for Today (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 1.

⁸ Holland, The Preaching Tradition: A Brief History, 111.

⁹ Holland, The Preaching Tradition: A Brief History, 23.

¹⁰ Holland, The Preaching Tradition: A Brief History, 32-33.

King of the Franks, but it was not until the thirteenth century that there was a concentrated attempt at renewal of preaching.¹¹

Two orders specifically dedicated to the art of preaching were created around the time of the Lateran Council of 1215. The Preaching Brothers of Dominic and the Brothers of the Poor of Francis of Assisi were both dedicated to preaching, since their founders believed that only by the proclamation of scripture could the corrupt conditions of the world be changed and reformed.¹² Both orders contributed greatly to the theory and knowledge of homiletics, and produced such great preachers as Anthony of Padua, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, John Capistrano and Bernardino of Siena. It was also at this time that Alan of Lille produced his manual on preaching entitled The Art of Preaching, which is representative of the kind of work being done in homiletics during that period.¹³

Pre-Reformation Preaching

With the Renaissance came continued effort in the renewal of preaching. The Englishman John Wycliffe and the Italian Girolamo Savonarola, a Dominican, became "champions . . . of the new doctrine of the primacy of preaching."¹⁴ Savonarola paved the way for Luther and the Reformation a century later with such pronouncements as, "If of these two things you can do only one--either hear the mass or hear the sermon--you should let the mass go, rather than the sermon. . . . There is less peril for your soul in not hearing mass

¹¹ Holland, The Preaching Tradition: A Brief History, 37.

¹² Holland, The Preaching Tradition: A Brief History, 37.

¹³ Alan of Lille, The Art of Preaching, trans. Gillian R. Evans (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 6.

¹⁴ Holland, The Preaching Tradition: A Brief History, 40.

than in not hearing the sermon."¹⁵ Statements such as this caused him to run afoul of Pope Alexander VI, and as a result Savonarola was excommunicated, hanged, and burned.¹⁶

Preaching in the Reformation Period

Finally, at the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, preaching once again regained primacy in the life of the worshiping community, with Martin Luther insisting that, contrary to common practice, the sermon should be central in worship.¹⁷ Luther had rejected the Eucharist as foundational to the faith, and replaced it with the notion that "the Bible and preaching form that point of contact--that bodyless intersection--where the divine and the human meet."¹⁸ So it was for Luther that there was no higher calling than the preaching of the Word, which is how one is led to Christ. Other great Reformers such as John Calvin echoed the idea of the centrality of preaching as the place where humanity comprehends God, and in his Institutes makes it clear that the sacraments derive their efficacy only from the Word and are empty rituals without the Word. Thus it is clear to see that it was as a result of the beliefs of those such as Luther and Calvin that the emphasis in worship in churches of the Reformed tradition became preaching, as opposed to the Mass.

Sermon Form Throughout the Ages

Just as the vitality and importance of preaching in worship has waxed and waned over the centuries, so has the actual form of the sermon changed.

¹⁵ Quoted in John Stott, Between Two Worlds (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 22.

¹⁶ Holland, The Preaching Tradition: A Brief History, 41.

¹⁷ Stott, 24.

¹⁸ Holland, The Preaching Tradition: A Brief History, 42.

The biblical record presents us with a variety of models of form. For example, Jesus delivered sermons in a narrative style that we call parables; Peter used a "characteristic Hebrew style with vigorous verbs, concrete illustrations, and a minimum of abstractions";¹⁹ and Paul, probably influenced by classical Greek rhetoric, preached in a style that contained rationally oriented, apologetic thought patterns.²⁰

In a similar vein, a structural analysis of sermons preached throughout the centuries reveals an ever changing form. Origen used allegorical interpretation, thus uniting exegesis and preaching.²¹ Tertullian introduced Latin rhetorical influence into preaching.²² Anthony of Padua utilized Aristotelian logic, actually breaking his sermons up into sections.²³ And an emphasis on thematic preaching with three distinct parts emerged during the Middle Ages.²⁴ Extant sermons of Martin Luther suggest that his only rule for form was to be "faithful to the subject."²⁵

¹⁹ Holland, The Preaching Tradition: A Brief History, 19.

²⁰ Brilioth, 16.

²¹ Holland, The Preaching Tradition: A Brief History, 36.

²² Brilioth, 10.

²³ Holland, The Preaching Tradition: A Brief History, 39.

²⁴ Brilioth, 79-80.

²⁵ Brilioth, 112.

This constant change has caused Richard Lischer to write, "In the history of its preaching, the church has moved from form to form. . . . No form of sermon has proven normative."²⁶

Preaching in the United States

In the history of the sermon in the United States, the same pattern of emphasis and decline in the centrality and vitality of preaching is evidenced.

While one could argue that each generation has produced some great preachers, it would seem that certain periods of time have produced a larger number of great preachers than other periods.

The period dating approximately from 1620-1750 produced such great New England preachers as John Cotton, Thomas Hooker, Samuel Danforth, Cotton Mather, Richard Mather, Increase Mather, Solomon Stoddard, Jonathan Edwards, and Charles Chauncey. This was also the period of the great revivalist preachers George Whitefield, Gilbert Tennant, and John Davenport. While there was religious life going on in other parts of the New World (the Spanish had been in New Mexico and Florida since the mid-sixteenth century), it was in the culture of New England, whose people had fled the Old World to establish a New Jerusalem, that preaching began to develop as a potent tool in American life.²⁷

With some notable exceptions such as Charles Finney, William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker, and Alexander Campbell, it would seem that the period 1750-1850 experienced a decline in preaching. Certainly preaching was much in evidence during the period of the American Revolution, and there

²⁶ Richard Lischer, "Preaching and the Rhetoric of Promise," Word and World 8, no.1 (Winter 1988):69.

²⁷ Holland, The Preaching Tradition: A Brief History, 51.

are authors who would argue that the American Revolution was in fact fostered in the pulpits of New England,²⁸ but, generally speaking, the voice of the pulpit lost its power at about the time of the Revolution.²⁹ This decline was followed by what is often referred to as the golden age of preaching, that period of approximately one hundred years (1850-1950) when such princes of the pulpit as Henry Ward Beecher, Phillips Brooks, John Broadus, Dwight Moody, Horace Bushnell, Washington Gladden, Walter Rauschenbush, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Sunday, and Norman Vincent Peale emerged to speak the Christian message to the people of the United States.³⁰

Sermon Form in the United States

Just as there has been a change in the quality of preaching in the United States over the decades, so also has there been a constant change in form. From the earliest times the great diversity of peoples emigrating to the New World brought with them a diverse understanding of worship, and this resulted in a great variety of styles and forms of preaching, appropriate to the cultural milieu from which a particular tradition emerged.³¹ Likewise, the rugged individualists who had the courage and self-reliance to make the passage

²⁸ Harry Stout, The New England Soul (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 259-316.

²⁹ Holland, The Preaching Tradition: A Brief History, 60.

³⁰ It should be noted that all the preachers listed are male, caucasian, and protestant. This is not to suggest that the only preachers of note were of those characteristics, but rather that the dominant culture and tradition of that time precluded the widespread recognition of female, Afro-American, or Roman Catholic preachers of ability.

³¹ Holland, The Preaching Tradition: A Brief History, 51-56.

across the Atlantic and settle the New World tended to "listen with favor only to rhetoric . . . supportive of that orientation."³²

A survey of sermons preached throughout the years of American history reveals a constant change in form. In the seventeenth century, the great Puritan preacher John Cotton used an analytic form, "usually of abstract exposition."³³ Jonathan Edwards, while concerned about arousing the "affections" as a part of the religious process, advocated a scholarly approach, actually enumerating points under various headings.³⁴ By the late nineteenth century many preachers had moved to a more expressive and extemporaneous style, perhaps best characterized by Henry Ward Beecher, who was described by Senator Oliver Smith of Indiana as "a preacher who is a landscape painter of Christianity. Mr. Beecher has no model . . . he is always new."³⁵ Probably the foremost preacher of the first part of the twentieth century, Harry Emerson Fosdick, used an organized, rationalist form, often beginning a new section of the sermon with words similar to, "The second point I would like to make. . . ."³⁶ Thus does the history of the form of sermons delivered in the United States agree with Richard Lischer's observation that there has been no normative form of sermon design throughout history.

³² Holland, The Preaching Tradition: A Brief History, 54.

³³ Holland, The Preaching Tradition: A Brief History, 52.

³⁴ Paul Ramsey, introduction to The Collected Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 1, ed. Paul Ramsey (London: Oxford, 1957), 17.

³⁵ Paxton Hibben, Henry Ward Beecher: An American Portrait (New York: Readers Club, 1947), 98.

³⁶ See Lionel Crocker, ed. Harry Emerson Fosdick's Art of Preaching: An Anthology (Springfield, Mass.: Charles C. Thomas, 1971).

Problem

As we look back over the past forty years of preaching in the United States, it would seem that, again with some exceptions, the art of preaching has been on the decline. In every decade since 1950 there have been numerous writers voicing their concern over the decline in preaching. Henry Sloan Coffin wrote in 1952 that "there is much current disparagement of preaching, and that among some of the more thoughtful of our churches."³⁷ In the next decade, the great German theologian Helmut Thielicke stated that "preaching itself has decayed and disintegrated to the point where it is close to the stage of dying."³⁸ William Willimon relates a poignant story that illustrates the decline in the seventies. The pastor of Christ Church (United Methodist) in Manhattan, "removed the pulpit altogether and did his preaching from behind the communion table. . . . his action signaled the death of the centrality of preaching in Protestantism."³⁹ While it is certainly true that revivalist preachers have had great success in preaching with little use of a pulpit, Willimon's point is that the preaching of the Word, seen as central in the Reformation tradition and symbolized by the placement of the pulpit, has lost its centrality in the life of the mainline church. John Stott pulls no punches about his opinion concerning preaching in the eighties: "The standard of preaching in the modern world is deplorable."⁴⁰ As we look at the beginning of the nineties, it would appear that

³⁷ Henry Sloan Coffin, Communion Through Preaching (New York: Scribner's, 1952), 2.

³⁸ Helmut Thielicke, The Trouble With the Church, trans. John Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 2.

³⁹ William Willimon, Integrative Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 10.

⁴⁰ Stott, 7.

preaching is still in trouble: "Preaching has disintegrated to a moral proclamation--'You're not doing well, so do better.'"⁴¹

No denomination is immune from this failure. The United Church of Christ, whose roots are found (among other places) in the great preaching tradition of the New England Congregationalists, also suffers from this crisis in preaching. Walter Brueggemann, Old Testament scholar at Columbia Theological Seminary and UCC member, when asked by the author to give his opinion of preaching in the United Church of Christ, put it succinctly: "It stinks!" Barbara Brown Zikmund, president of Hartford Theological Seminary and author of Hidden Histories Within the United Church of Christ, wrote in a correspondence to the author that preaching in the UCC is not communicating the faith:

For the first time in twenty years I have been looking for a new church home (we moved to a new community). For six months I have visited many UCC churches on Sunday mornings and I have been consistently disappointed. I have shared this dismay with others around the country and they have confessed their concern for the preaching ministry of the church as well.⁴²

Clearly there is a problem in preaching in the traditions of modern mainline protestantism in general, and within the United Church of Christ in particular. It may be that preaching has been lost among the myriad other tasks for which the modern preacher is responsible, or it may be that seminaries simply do not prepare the modern pastor for the preaching task. Regardless of

⁴¹ David Kerr, General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church, lecture delivered at a workshop on preaching, Phoenix, Arizona on 11 Feb. 1991.

⁴² Barbara Brown Zikmund, letter to author, 12 Nov. 1990.

the reason, it would appear that the church is facing a crisis that needs attention.

Mainline protestant churches may be on the verge of a renaissance of preaching. Recent efforts at church renewal by the mainline denominations have brought about an increased interest in the development of effective preaching. Research conducted by the General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church indicates that pastors and laypeople of growing United Methodist churches list "vital worship" as the number one factor, among a list of twelve factors, in church growth.⁴³ This trend is supported by research documented by the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries and underscored by current studies discussed in the literature on church growth.

Such interest has resulted in new research in the area of homiletics. This research has included the use of language,⁴⁴ the actual content of the sermon,⁴⁵ and the form in which the sermon is delivered. Examples of some of the new forms of sermon construction being suggested in the past decade include the inductive approach advocated by Fred Craddock,⁴⁶ the narrative

⁴³ Cited in O. Dean Martin, Invite: Preaching for Response (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1987), vi.

⁴⁴ See Charles Bartow, Effective Speech Communication in Leading Worship (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988); Thomas Long, The Senses of Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988); Thomas Troeger, Imagining a Sermon (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990); and Terrance Tilley, Talking to God: An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis of Religious Language (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

⁴⁵ Cf. William Beardslee, et. al, Biblical Preaching on the Death of Jesus (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989); Richard Eslinger, A New Hearing (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987); Thomas Long, The Witness of Preaching (Louisville: Westminster, 1989); and Arthur Van Seters, ed., Preaching as a Social Act (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988).

⁴⁶ Fred Craddock, Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985).

form of Eugene Lowry,⁴⁷ and the moves and structures suggested by David Buttrick.⁴⁸

Thesis

To borrow some imagery in the Creation story found in Gen. 1:2, this project argues that a sermon can, like the earth gazed upon by God before Creation, be "without form and void." Since current research indicates that preaching is one important factor in a growing church, it is the thesis of this project that a form analysis of sermons preached in churches with increasing worship attendance, when compared with an analysis of sermons preached in churches with decreasing levels of worship attendance, will reveal a difference in form between the sermons preached in the two groups.

Scope and Limitations

The focus of this project will be to explore one element found in preaching--form--and to discover if there is in fact a difference in form of those sermons being preached in churches of the United Church of Christ with increasing worship attendance and the form of sermons being preached in churches with decreasing levels of worship attendance. Throughout the history of preaching there has been an ongoing debate about whether preaching is a rhetorical endeavor or a theological discipline. This project does not intend to debate that issue, nor does it attempt to develop a theology of preaching.

Likewise the project is not designed to explore all of the elements that constitute preaching. Preaching is an oral act which takes place in the context of worship, and various elements are present in any one sermon, including

⁴⁷ Eugene Lowry, The Homiletical Plot (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980).

⁴⁸ David Buttrick, Homiletic (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

delivery, form, content, occasion, hermeneutic, and the charisma of the preacher. Although all elements of preaching are worth exploring, this project is limited to the study of only one element of homiletic, namely form.

A basic premise of this project is that there is a causal relationship between preaching and church growth. One could debate that premise, since there is no statistical evidence to prove that preaching, alone among all the elements of a growing church, is singularly responsible for increased worship attendance. The evidence that does exist, however, is anecdotal; people report that in their opinion preaching is vital to a growing congregation. Hopefully this project will shed some further light on the relationship between preaching and church growth. Therefore for the purposes of this study, a basic premise will be that preaching and church growth are related. Church growth and an increase in worship attendance are not specific concerns of this project; research on growth and increase in worship are used only as one way in which to define parameters for the purposes of comparing two groups of sermon forms.

Definition of Terms

Terms used in this project are defined as follows.

Preaching and Sermon: While there are many poetic definitions of preaching, such as "preaching is the Word of God which he himself has spoken,"⁴⁹ and "preaching is the exploration of a living symbol,"⁵⁰ for the purposes of this project "preaching" and "sermon" shall refer to that oral act which takes place in the context of the Sunday morning worship in the United

⁴⁹ Karl Barth, The Preaching of the Gospel, trans. B. E. Hooke (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 9.

⁵⁰ David Buttrick, Preaching Jesus Christ (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 76.

Church of Christ, during which time one designated individual delivers a monologic address, to an audience, based on either scripture or topic.

Effective: "Effective" preaching refers to sermons delivered in a church which has experienced a growth in worship attendance, that is to say an increase in the number of those persons who, as reported to the Board for Homeland Ministries of the United Church of Christ, attend the Sunday morning worship celebration of a particular church.

Growing church: This is defined as a United Church of Christ member church of between 150-500 members whose worship attendance during the period 1987-1989 has shown an increase of 15 percent or more.

Declining church: The term relates to any United Church of Christ member church of between 150-500 members which has shown a decrease of 15 percent or more in worship attendance during the period 1987-1989.

Content: Refers to the actual message contained within the sermon.

Form: The organization and structure of the thought units contained within the content of a sermon.

Methodology

The United Church Board for Homeland Ministries was contacted for a list of churches whose membership was between 150-500. This size church was selected for the project because these churches represent 43 percent of all UCC churches and 46 percent of the total membership of the United Church of Christ.⁵¹ In addition to membership size, a sort was done for churches of that size which showed an increase or decrease in worship attendance during the

⁵¹ Statistics prepared by Marjorie Royle, Secretary for Research, United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, 10th Floor, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, 10115.

years 1987, 1988, and 1989. This sort produced a list of 1,851 UCC churches of 150-500 members which showed an increase or a decrease in average worship attendance for the years 1987-1989.

From this list a total of thirty churches was chosen for inclusion in the project. There were a number of criteria for selection for each of these thirty churches. Each church had to show a membership increase or decrease of at least 15 percent. The pastor had to have been called before 1985 (to avoid the natural change in worship attendance that comes with a change in pastoral leadership). It is interesting to note that of the top fifty churches listed as having growing worship attendance, 53 percent had pastors who had been called to that congregation within the period 1987-1989.

In an effort to avoid skewing the study by looking at only one region, the churches were selected from five basic geographical regions (Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Northwest, and Southwest). An attempt was made to choose churches from a variety of settings, such as urban, rural, and suburban, again to avoid skewing the project by focusing on too narrow a population.

Telephone contact was made with twenty-five pastors, which represented twelve churches with increasing worship attendance and thirteen churches with decreasing levels of worship attendance. During the telephone conversation the purpose of the project was explained to the pastor; each pastor was then asked if s/he would be willing to submit a total of nine sermons for form analysis. Out of the twenty-five churches contacted, fifteen pastors agreed to participate in the study, seven from growing churches and eight from declining churches. Each one of the participating pastors was sent a letter (see Appendix A) which again explained the study and requested that they submit a total of nine sermons, three each from the years 1987, 1988, and 1989 for form analysis. In an effort to prevent the pastors from self-selecting what they might believe to be

their best sermons, each pastor was instructed to submit sermons from specific months.

From the original list of fifteen pastors who agreed to submit sermons for form analysis, only four submitted sermons within six weeks of the initial request. Therefore a second letter was sent out to the remaining eleven pastors, reminding them of their agreement to participate in the study and requesting that they submit sermons within four weeks time or notify the author that they no longer wished to participate in the study (see Appendix B). Within that four week period, six more pastors submitted sermons for analysis, with one pastor responding that he no longer wished to participate in the study. The remaining five pastors were never heard from again (two were from churches with increasing worship attendance and three were from churches with decreasing levels of worship attendance).

So from the original list of twenty-five churches included for possible study, only ten actually submitted information. Thus the hoped for representation was not achieved; sermons from increasing congregations represented the Southeast, Northeast, Midwest, Northwest, and Southwest, but all came from urban areas. The five sets of sermons from declining churches were from the Northeast (2), Midwest, Southeast, and Northwest, again coming primarily from urban areas. All sermons used for analysis are from white preachers (although two minority preachers agreed to participate, they did not submit sermons within the allowed time frame), and all preachers are male (no females were among churches which met criteria for analysis).

Out of the nine sermons that had been requested from each preacher, five were chosen for actual form analysis and comparison. The selection was done at random by labeling each sermon series with the numbers 1-9 and then drawing a number from a hat which corresponded to the number assigned to a

particular sermon. The first five numbers drawn were the sermons used for actual form analysis.

The model for form analysis was an appropriation of the Moves and Structures model proposed by David Buttrick.⁵² There are many extant models of form currently available which might have been used, and it is important to note that the model actually chosen does not represent the only, nor perhaps even the best, model of homiletic. But Buttrick's form provided a type of model that was most easily adaptable to the needs of this project. In addition it is clear that both the form of the model itself and the theoretical constructs from which it emerges most specifically address the three primary requisites of form and the three primary divisions of form advocated by scholars during the past century. The specific model proposed by Buttrick is very complicated and would, if used exactly, not be useful for form analysis, for it is doubtful that many preachers follow the exact structure advocated by Buttrick. There are general conceptions of movement and structure in Buttricks' theory which are very helpful for understanding sermon construction. Therefore, an appropriation of his proposed model, explained more fully in Chapter 3, was used for actual sermon analysis.

The methodology of conclusion was one of synthesis, drawing together the current research on homiletic form and the results of the sermon analysis to reach a conclusion concerning the differences in form found in growing and declining churches.

⁵² David Buttrick, Homiletic.

CHAPTER 2

A Review of Homiletic Form Theory in the Twentieth Century

Structure is not an arbitrary quality, to be selected or ignored at random. Without verbal structure there can be no communication, only words following one after another. Carelessness about structure in preaching is tantamount to carelessness about communication. The careless preacher might as well stand in a corner and babble to himself. The preacher who wishes to share his message must structure it.

David Randolph, The Renewal of Preaching.

The Purpose and Value of Form

"That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet," speaks Juliet in the play Romeo and Juliet.¹ 'Tis very true, no doubt, for words and names are but symbols of that which has corporeal existence, and what we name a thing is arbitrary. However, that rose to which our fair heroine was referring might, by any other shape, be a petunia! Everything in creation has a form, some shape which lends to that object a portion of its identity. In the Judeo-Christian creation myth found in Genesis, we are told that the "earth was without form, and void" suggesting that without form there is only chaos, non-existence. This biblical notion is echoed by phenomenologists, who believe that the form an object takes is intrinsic to understanding that object. It would seem that the Bauhaus school of architecture is also in agreement with this understanding of the importance of form, since for that school of thought it is maintained that "form follows function," suggesting that form and function (the very existence of an object) are intrinsically related.

Likewise, this project maintains that an understanding of form is basic to the development of effective sermons. This project is concerned with the

¹ William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet (New York: Scholastic Books, 1969), act 2, sc. 2, lines 43-44.

question of form in sermons, and seeks to examine forms of sermons preached within the United Church of Christ in an effort to describe elements of form that can be identified as effective and ineffective.

The identification of an "effective" sermon form is not an easy task, since there are many forms of address which can be accurately labeled as sermon. To follow-up on the prose of Shakespeare, while it is accurate to state that a rose by any other shape might be a petunia, it would still be a flower. Likewise it is true that in architecture, many different specific forms, ranging from the nature connected ideas of Frank Lloyd Wright to the massive works of I. M. Pei, all come under the genus of building.

So it is with sermons. Sermons come in all shapes and sizes, ranging from the meditative homilies of Howard Thurman to the theological treatises of Paul Tillich to story forms reminiscent of Lake Wobegon and Garrison Keillor.

Some scholars argue that a sermon is defined more by its content and purpose than by its form and that "there is no form that can be identified as 'sermon.'² Thus many writers, for example Fred Craddock, maintain that the good preacher will in fact vary his or her form dramatically, depending upon the function which a particular sermon is to serve.³ It is interesting to note that, in spite of the myth to the contrary, teachers of homiletics have, for at least the last century, advocated a wide variety of sermon forms, depending upon the specific

² Craddock, Preaching, 170.

³ Craddock, Preaching, 177.

intent of a given sermon.⁴ As far back as the mid-nineteenth century, John Broadus, whose works have become classics in some seminaries and whose book has undergone four editions and revisions since 1856, stated that "no one form is adequate in all circumstances."⁵

In spite of the assertion that there is no single form adequate to serve all sermons, all scholars agree that some form of organization for delivery of the sermon is necessary. Every author researched for this project had his or her own methods for approaching sermon preparation, and each devoted a significant amount of space to the discovery of a form or forms that would adequately communicate the message of a particular sermon.

A sermon is a type of verbal communication, and as communication it must have a form which can be transmitted to and decoded by a group of auditors. This is basic to communication theory. Thus the creation of a sermon requires the same discipline and need for form as any communication event, since sermon structures are communication events and not merely the process of sharing information.⁶ Long maintains that "form is absolutely vital to

⁴ In researching this project, the author consulted manuals on homiletic preparation and delivery written by fifteen authors (see bibliography) ranging from 1856 to the present and not one of those authors suggested the mythic "three points and a poem" type of form often derided as the classical (and outmoded) model for sermon form. Harry Emerson Fosdick has often been credited with advocating this type of form, but a structural analysis of his sermons shows that he did not utilize this form very often, and none of his writings indicate in any way that he advocated this mythic type as the preferred form. It would be interesting to discover just where this so called "classical" form type had its origins, and if anyone did in fact advocate it. None of the research for this project revealed any trace of that form as preferred (much to the surprise of the project author).

⁵ John Broadus, On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons. 4th ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1944), 84.

⁶ Long, The Witness of Preaching, 96.

the meaning and effect of a sermon,"⁷ and Elizabeth Achtemeier states that "unless the content of the text is expressed in a form that performs the desired function, the sermon will not communicate its intended message."⁸

So, just what is a sermon form? As stated earlier, a sermon is more than just the sharing of information, such that "form is not simply a rack, a hanger, a line over which to drape one's presentation."⁹ We can say that form is an "organizational plan"¹⁰ around which the information shared in the sermon is constructed. For David Randolph, sermon construction equals "the process of discovering and employing the verbal structures which best convey the meaning of the biblical texts to the hearers so that they are moved to respond to it."¹¹ Therefore one can state that the plan of a sermon form exposes the difference between sermons which "reveal and those which merely expose. . . between sermons which share significant thought patterns and those which merely uncover stray thoughts."¹²

Clearly there is no one specific form that can be designated as sermon; nonetheless there are certain common aspects found in all forms of sermon advocated by scholars over the past one hundred years. While there is disagreement over which "form," if any, of sermon is best, all scholars agree that

⁷ Long, The Witness of Preaching, 92.

⁸ Elizabeth Achtemeier, Creative Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 61.

⁹ Craddock, Preaching, 172.

¹⁰ Long, The Witness of Preaching, 93.

¹¹ David Randolph, The Renewal of Preaching (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 98.

¹² Randolph, 101.

there are three vital aspects found in all sermons with good form. Authors have their favorite terms for these basic aspects, but they all refer to basic ideas intrinsic to good (effective) sermon form. For the purposes of this project we will refer to these three basic aspects as unity, organization, and movement, a combination of terms taken from various authors.

The Three Primary Requisites of Form

Unity

The first of the three primary requisites is unity. Blackwood states that unity is the most important of the three elements, and this belief is echoed by Lenski, Broadus, and Fosdick.¹³ It is not as easy to define the concept of "unity" as one might first expect. Unity, at its simplest, refers to the fact that a entire sermon is constructed around only a single theme or guiding principle. How the construction of a sermon actually takes form around that single principle or theme may occasion some debate, but a sermon none-the-less must have only a single theme or principle which guides the formation of the sermon, if that sermon is to be effective.

For example, if one were to preach on Ps. 1:1, there are a variety of sermons forms that could be applied.

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.¹⁴

¹³ See Andrew Blackwood, On the Preparation of Sermons (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1948), 130; R. C. H. Lenski, The Sermon: Its Homiletical Construction (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), 78; Broadus, 45; and Crocker, 123.

¹⁴ References are to the New Revised Standard Version.

Regardless of the specific structure however, a sermon can be said to be unified only if there is a single identifiable theme or principle throughout the entire sermon. For example, one might focus on happiness, or the law of the Lord, or reflection on the law of the Lord, and then construct a sermon around one of those themes. One might outline such a sermon as follows:

I. Happy are those who do not:

- A. follow the advice of the wicked
- B. take the path that sinners tread
- C. sit in the seat of scoffers

II. Happy are those who:

- A. delight in the law of the Lord
- B. meditate on that law night and day

Depending on how the preacher actually addresses the various points outlined above, the sermon may or may not have unity. The theme of happiness could unify the seemingly disparate ideas of advice and wicked, path and sinners, seat and scoffers with the ideas of delight in the law of the Lord and reflection on that law, or those disparate ideas could distract from the theme of happiness, and so destroy unity. Thus unity is dependent upon how various concepts are presented and discussed in relation to a particular theme or guiding principle. A sermon can therefore be judged as having unity only by identifying the guiding principle or theme of a sermon, and then examining the text of a sermon to see if the various parts relate to, or distract from, the understanding of that guiding principle or theme.

Lenski argues that to simply look at various sides of an argument from a variety of perspectives, such as in a topical sermon which might address a single issue,¹⁵ is not to have a unified sermon. Likewise there is "no genuine

¹⁵ Lenski, 78.

unity in an essay sermon with a number of interesting sub-heads for the sections of thought that have been selected,"¹⁶ nor is there unity "when a theme is treated under parts that merely tell us more or less of what is in that theme."¹⁷

For virtually all the authors consulted, unity in sermons ultimately had to do with making certain that every point contained within the sermon relates in some direct fashion to a single theme or guiding principle. Blackwood suggests that there is a simple test for unity in a sermon: can one person in the pew relate the central thought or principle of the sermon, in two sentences or less, to another person?¹⁸ If the answer is no, then the sermon lacks unity. Each and every paragraph, sentence, illustration, and idea must in some way, shape or form reinforce or prove or explain or illuminate the central theme or guiding principle (Broadus calls it the "proposition") of the sermon. If some part of the sermon does not fulfill that criteria, then the sermon lacks unity.

To lack unity is to confuse the audience. Communication research indicates that there is a fatigue effect on audiences. That means that the longer an audience has to sit in one place and listen to an oral presentation, the less they remember, unless all parts of that oral presentation reinforce a theme or guiding principle made early on in the presentation.¹⁹ Thus Fosdick's statement that you must "Tell them the truth you want to tell them right off. . . . Climax is achieved by showing them the Matterhorn in the beginning, reshowing it,

¹⁶ Lenski, 79.

¹⁷ Lenski, 79.

¹⁸ Blackwood, 131.

¹⁹ Paul A. Soukup, Christian Communication: A Bibliographical Survey (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989.)

reshowing it, and each time the Matterhorn gets bigger,"²⁰ is seen to be supported by communications research.

Unity is achieved by having a very specific task in mind for the sermon. This task might come forward as a proposition or thesis-like statement, around which the entire sermon is constructed. Austin Phelps likens the proposition, so essential to constructing a unified sermon, to a tree trunk from which the body of the sermon expands, the root being the idea in the text.²¹ Broadus refers to this process as finding the objective,²² which is the ultimate aim of the sermon. Craddock indicates that preachers should ask of each sermon, "What do I want to say?" and "What do I want to do?"²³ which, if answered, will provide a guiding principle and thus lead to a unified sermon.

A unified sermon is valuable to both the preacher and the listener; Fred Craddock provides a list of some of those values:

having in mind a clear message gives confidence to the preacher through the preparation and delivery of the sermon; sensing that the preacher is well prepared sets the hearers free to listen more attentively; being specific in one's focus releases the imagination of the preacher for creating and for gathering enriching materials; having a single theme provides the assurance of where one is going in the message, which is key to movement; the restraint of one idea adds to listener interest because energies are not dissipated on side trips to nowhere; a single governing theme enables the preacher to hold the message in mind more easily and therefore to be less dependent on a manuscript or notes; and the one central idea provides a

²⁰ Quoted in Crocker, 123.

²¹ Austin Phelps, The Theory of Preaching (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1893), 308.

²² Broadus, 49.

²³ Craddock, Preaching, 155.

natural control over which materials are admissible into the sermon and which are not, the theme serving as a magnet to attract only the appropriate.²⁴

Clearly it can be seen that unity is imperative in the formation of an effective sermon form.

Organization

Organization, like unity, is a difficult concept to define in a single sentence. If we were limiting our discussion of form to one type of sermon, say for example one in which the intent of the sermon is to have the listener remember certain statements in a particular sequence, then the organization would "be properly visable and call attention to itself by repetition and summary."²⁵ This would be a sort of "analytic" form, whereby one might have a sermon with three main thoughts, and the sum of those three thoughts would be the theme of the sermon, one following naturally and rationally after the other. But since we are not limiting our discussion to such a particular type of construction, a more complex definition is required.

One must not confuse order with organization. In this project the concept of organization refers to much more than the mere ordering of one's thoughts in a rational manner. The alphabet or a numerical system are both examples of order, but they are not the only examples of organization. To limit the concept of organization to a notion of order would be to limit the possibilites for sermon form. Not all good sermons follow a rational, orderly form, and not all sermons that have order are good sermons. A narrative or story form of sermon might, at first glance, seem to have no organization, as it might appear to jump from point

²⁴ Craddock, Preaching, 156.

²⁵ Craddock, Preaching, 184.

to point as the story unfolds. But that is the nature of poetry! It is only at the conclusion of the narrative that all the parts are tied together, and what appeared disorderly is revealed to have a very subtle and sophisticated organizational form.

Organization has to do with a bird's-eye view of the unfolding drama of the sermon; each division of the sermon must relate to the other divisions in such a manner that each portion participates in the creation of a whole. When evaluating organization, a good question to ask of any single part is, "Does it relate to the central theme or guiding principle?" If a particular section does not relate to the central theme or principle, then it serves as a distraction from the sermon as a whole, and therefore the sermon could be evaluated as being disorganized. In seeking to identify unity in a sermon, one asks if each example, illustration, sentence and paragraph relates to the central theme (topic, proposition, point, problem, etc) or guiding principle. In seeking to identify organization, one asks the question, "Does this example, illustration, etc. not only relate to the theme or guiding principle, but does it make that theme or guiding principle more clear to the listener?" With organization only "such parts as are vital to the principle"²⁶ are allowed into the sermon form, with all extraneous material being rejected; the various parts of the sermon are put together in such a way as to most effectively express the guiding principle or theme of a sermon.

An example of organization is provided by Lenski, who uses the idea of an army to illustrate this concept. For an army on parade, all that is needed for organization is a line. The guiding principle for an army on parade is simply to show the army to the viewers, thus all that is required is an unbroken line. An

²⁶ Lenski, 80.

army going into battle, however, is a very different matter. In this instance there is a plan of attack, which is the guiding principle. Thus it is of vital importance for the army to be organized in a very particular manner, so as to best defeat the enemy and win the war. Here the army is not necessarily orderly, but it is organized. This difference is very important to sermon form, for as Lenski states, "the sermon is not a review of troops, but battle carried to victory."²⁷

An organized sermon is one in which all the various parts are arranged in such a manner as to direct the mind of the hearer to a single point; unity is the guiding principle or theme by which material is judged appropriate for inclusion or exclusion in the construction of a sermon in order to drive home a single idea. Therefore the organization of an effective sermon should be based on the guiding principle or theme of the sermon.

Movement

The third and final primary requisite found in all effective forms of sermon is movement. Movement is the progression towards a goal, a concept for which the Germans have the word Zielstrebigkeit. (The Germans always have a good scholarly word for every concept.) This concept is found throughout classical rhetoric, particularly in the works of Horace, and the great orator Demosthenes, who wrote of movement that,

It is the steady, unceasing sweep of thought, gathering force as it proceeds, until it is a mighty torrent, that constitutes effective speech, that takes great audiences off their feet, melting their wills into one, and stirring them with a common feeling and purpose.²⁸

²⁷ Lenski, 81.

²⁸ Quoted in [Johann Michael] Reu, Homiletics, trans. Albert Steinhauser (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1924), 420.

Simply stated, movement has to do with the sequence in which the various parts of a sermon are arranged in order to achieve the most satisfactory cumulative effect. It is important to note that movement is not necessarily linear or progressive in a numerical sense. A poet moves the reader, or a play moves the audience, without necessarily being progressive in a strictly rational fashion. Many times stories do not move in a linear fashion, yet they constantly propel the reader towards the ending. For example, the novel Shogun, by James Clavell, moves back and forth throughout the chapters between the lives of various characters, until at last all are brought together in a final conclusion. That is an example of non-linear movement. In a similar way a sermon might be organized around a particular theme in such a way that the listener is pulled or jarred from one place to another, but always with a goal in the distance. A sermon with movement always progresses forward, and never away or towards a dead end.

Blackwood compares the movement of a sermon to the rushing of a stream as it moves towards the ocean; the stream at times might move through level country and at other moments the waters might dash over rapids.²⁹ The stream takes all sorts of twists and turns, slower here, more rapid there, sometimes even turning back upon itself, but always it is moving towards the ocean, the ultimate goal.

Likewise, with a sermon there is an ultimate goal in sight which, based on the concept of unity discussed earlier, is the theme or guiding principle of the sermon, the point that one wishes to make or the feeling one wishes to engender in the audience. Every step in the sermon is a progression, a movement towards that ultimate goal. According to Fosdick, the most common

²⁹ Blackwood, 132.

cause of dull and ignorant sermons is the fact that there is no target in sight and therefore no movement towards a goal.³⁰ A sermon without movement is one in which the audience takes two steps forward and three steps back. It may be that a sermon provides a theme or principle early on, begins to make progress towards that desired goal or understanding, and then due to confusion, lack of clarity in direction, asides or intrusions, the movement forward is halted.

Unity, organization, and movement are very closely related, and constitute the necessary requisites for an effective sermon form. One can have one or two of these ingredients without the other. For example, a stand-up comic routine could be said to have unity, in that the desire of the comic is to make the audience laugh. To that end, everything the comic does is directed to produce laughter in the audience. Likewise, a stand-up comic routine can be said to have a certain kind of organization, even though that organization manifests itself through many different ideas, concepts, and themes in an effort to get the audience to laugh. At the end of a forty-five minute routine one could ask, as Blackwood suggests, for a two-sentence or less explanation as to the central thought or guiding principle of the routine. The answer would be, very simply, "To laugh at comic expressions of social or personal critique." That demonstrates a certain kind of unity. Likewise if one were to ask the organizational question, "Did all the parts relate to the central theme?" the answer would be "Yes" (assuming that the comic was in fact funny). Therefore the stand-up comic routine demonstrates unity (the desire to make people laugh as a guiding principle), it shows organization (everything is geared around the guiding principle of laughter), but it does not have movement; it does not go

³⁰ Crocker, 187.

anywhere. People laugh at the beginning and they laugh at the end, but they have not moved.

This is appropriate for a stand-up comic routine, but not for a sermon. An effective sermon should, according to all the teachers of homiletics of the past century, produce change in a listener; change means movement. One who attends a comedy presentation is not changed. They may be entertained, but it is doubtful that they are changed. At the very base of Christianity lays the principle of transformation, of change. So unity and organization without movement, may provide for an entertaining twenty minutes, but not a transforming twenty minutes.

Unity, organization, and movement are vital to effective sermon form in that they provide direction, clarity, and progression. To leave out one ingredient is to deleteriously impact the power of the other two. All three ingredients are vital to effective sermon form.

In addition to the three vital requisites of unity, organization, and movement, each effective sermon form contains within it three primary divisions: beginning, development, and ending, referred to in rhetorical theory as introduction, body, and conclusion. These terms from the theory of rhetoric can be construed as too narrow and limiting, depending upon the exact definition of each term, so for the purpose of understanding sermon form this project will utilize the terms beginning, development, and ending, which are terms suggested and preferred by Harry Emerson Fosdick.³¹ The exact nature of these divisions within the sermon form may vary a great deal, but every effective sermon has some part of it that can be identified as beginning, development, and ending.

³¹ Crocker, 189.

The Three Principal Divisions of Form

Beginning

The beginning of a sermon is more than just an introduction to the material to be presented. In classical oratory, the idea of an introduction is to "Tell 'em what you are going to tell 'em;" that is, the purpose is to lay out for the listener a map of the path that you are about to take, indicating where you are beginning, where you shall travel, and the place in which you expect to end up. The advantage of this strategy is that the listener, with prior knowledge of the route, might be better able to listen and comprehend the journey along the way. This is appropriate for oral presentations where the main desire is to have the listener understand and remember the main points of the presentation, but it may be limiting if the preacher has another desire in mind at the time of delivering the sermon.

Fred Craddock says that the purpose of a sermon is to "provide for an experience of God."³² If experience rather than memory is the goal, then a type of beginning other than that suggested by classical rhetoric may be demanded. Regardless of the intent of the sermon, some sort of beginning is necessary to set the stage for what follows. Research has indicated that a speaker has at the most two or three minutes in which to win or lose the attention of the audience present; therefore the beginning is vital in securing the goodwill and attention of the audience for the message being presented.

While the exact form of the beginning may (and should, depending upon the specific intent of the sermon) vary, the purpose of the beginning is to

³² Fred Craddock, lecture delivered on preaching and exegesis in the book of Romans to students at the Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, California, 17 July 1989.

"arouse interest, secure favor, and prepare to lead," according to Cicero.³³

Exactly how those purposes are accomplished varies; for one sermon it might be a poem, for another the laying out of the points to be covered, and for yet another it might be the prologue of a story. But regardless of its form, every effective sermon must have some identifiable beginning.

Development

The development (or body) of the sermon is that part which contains within it the main ideas or concepts of the sermon, communicated either through rational explanation or some process that allows the listener to experience those ideas and concepts to the fullest degree.

In a thematic type of sermon the development might include the actual enumeration of points in a 1-2-3 manner which leads the listener to a conclusion. In a story or narrative sermon the development would represent the unfolding of the plot, the further exploration of characters or concepts or experiences which have first been alluded to in the beginning. In a "not this, nor this, but this" type of sermon form the development would be the place where each "not this" is explored, until at last the final "but this" is presented. If one were using the explore, explain, apply model of sermon form, the development stage is the place where these concepts would be examined.

Generally speaking, the development stage of the sermon is the longest and most complex of the three divisions, since it is here that the meat of the matter is shared with the audience. The development follows the beginning, where the task is to enlarge, expand, and fill in the stage which was first set by the beginning. In a similar fashion the development is followed by the ending,

³³ Quoted in Blackwood, 109.

which ties together any lose ends and brings to conclusion all the points laid out in the development of the sermon.

Ending

The purpose of the ending is to do just that, stop the sermon in an effective and intentional manner. Such an ending has several important functions: to the material presented, to the audience, and to the preacher. In reference to the material presented, the purpose of the ending is to bring the discussion to a fitting conclusion; for the audience the ending function is to relate the truth helpfully and lastingly to life as they face it. For the preacher, the ending represents a leave taking in which vital and eternal issues are committed to the decision of those who have heard the sermon.

Exactly what form the ending takes, or how it is accomplished, is, once again, dependent upon the type of sermon one presents and exactly to what purpose the sermon itself was constructed. The ending might be the reiteration of the main points covered in the sermon; it might also be a postlude of the narrative, in which we learn that the characters lived happily ever after. If the design of the sermon was to arouse the listeners, it may be that the ending would be a final charge to the congregation to "Go thou and do likewise," thus representing an appeal to action. The types of endings are as varied as the types of sermon forms available and limited only by the creativity of the preacher.

However, it is important to state that whatever form the actual ending takes, there must be an ending, a completion point that is intentional and purposeful, for it is here that the final effectiveness of a sermon is measured. Broadus maintains that a conclusion "should be like a river, growing in volume

and power. It should not be like a stream that loses itself in a marsh."³⁴ All of the authors consulted agreed that one of the biggest problems with sermon form was the lack of an intentional and appropriate ending, whereby the sermon itself simply died and rotted, left dangling in the air just as fish baited, hooked, yet uncooked, rots in the sun, worthless to all in spite of the effort put forth to get it to that point.

A Variety of Forms

As stated earlier in this chapter, virtually all the authors researched for this project, representing a variety of perspectives over the past one hundred years, maintain that no one form is preferred for all occasions in the delivery of a sermon. Long argues that there exists for the preacher the danger of constantly creating sermon forms that "match our own ways of listening and learning,"³⁵ which would not be conducive to effective preaching to a varied audience. Audiences possess many styles of listening.

A sermon that includes many personal references and pastoral experiences will be for one listener a powerful and touching word, while another hearer will find it intellectually thin. A free-flowing, artistic, image-rich sermon will stimulate some hearers to see the faith in new ways, while others will find the same sermon opaque and confusing. A carefully ordered, tightly argued sermon will be received by some as a model of clarity and the occasion for deep insight, while others will find such a form dull and confining.³⁶

Communication research has indicated that the listener is not passive; rather, the listener participates in the process, and in fact will race ahead in

³⁴ Broadus, 108.

³⁵ Long, The Witness of Preaching, 130.

³⁶ Long, The Witness of Preaching, 130.

anticipation of what the preacher is to say, review what has been said, "debate with the preacher, rearrange the material, add to the sermon, wander away and return (sometimes!) . . . in effect the hearer is the co-creator of the sermon."³⁷

This of course produces an enormous problem for the preacher: how to create a sermon form that reaches all the audience at the same time. The reality is that it is impossible to create a single sermon form that will reach every person every time; hence it is important to vary the form in such a way that on any given occasion all of the audience will be able to hear the message being presented, because it is being presented in a way that is at least within their listening band. This places an incredible responsibility upon the preacher, who must then become the architect of his/her own sermons, based upon the audience present. Thus just as the gospel is presented in a variety of forms, so must the preacher "who faithfully bears witness to the gospel. . . . allow the fullness of the gospel to summon forth a rich diversity of sermon forms as well."³⁸

There is no end to the varied possibility as to sermon form; there are the thematic approaches, with any number of "points" to be made around a single topic, which was strongly supported by Phelps and McCracken.³⁹ Fosdick advocated this type of approach, suggesting that there should be the statement of a theme expressed in the introduction, which is then presented and the "box approach" or the "river approach."⁴⁰ Another classic approach to form is the line by line exposition of the biblical text, which was used quite frequently in the

³⁷ Long, The Witness of Preaching, 131.

³⁸ Long, The Witness of Preaching, 132.

³⁹ See Phelps, 387; and Robert J. McCracken, The Making of the Sermon. (New York: Harper & Bros., 1956), 95.

⁴⁰ Crocker, 198.

Congregational Churches of Colonial New England.⁴¹ There is the poetic sermon, which "does not so much state a thesis as create an effect."⁴² There is the reflection (essay) form; a classical oratorical form which has to do with persuasion, and story or "inductive" preaching,⁴³ as well as any other number of possibilities. Craddock lists twelve different possible forms, and Long lists eleven choices.⁴⁴

Clearly there are a wide variety of possibilities for sermon form available to the preacher, any of which will serve to effectively transmit the message of the sermon to a given audience. The desire of this project is to discern if there is today, within the United Church of Christ a particular form that seems to be more effective than other forms in relationship to increasing worship attendance. To discover if that is so, it is necessary to develop a model of sermon analysis, out of all the models available, to use as a means of comparing various sermons. Such a model is explored in Chapter Three, where the current homiletic theory of David Buttrick is examined and appropriated for use in this project.

⁴¹ Stout, 148.

⁴² Randolph, 107.

⁴³ Fred Craddock is often given credit for first discovering and advocating this style of preaching with his 1972 book, As One Without Authority; it should be noted that Blackwood refers to the concept and theory of "inductive preaching" as early as 1958, in his book, On the Preparation of Sermons (pg. 143).

⁴⁴ See Craddock, Preaching, 177; and Long, The Witness of Preaching, 127.

CHAPTER 3

The Moves and Structures of David Buttrick

If a congregation leaves a church filled with admiration for a preacher's rhetorical skills, then the sermon has failed utterly. We do not preach to be liked, admired, or applauded. Sermon craft is never intended to dazzle, but always to serve.

David Buttrick, Homiletic

As discussed in Chapter 2, there are a multiple of ways in which to form a sermon. Throughout the ages a variety of forms has been explored and expanded, and it would seem that at different historical periods different specific forms have dominated, some with more success, some with less. Still, in spite of the variety of form, it is clear that regardless of the specific structure of a sermon, virtually every homiletiician of the past century agrees that an effective sermon must have a beginning, development, and an ending; likewise every effective sermon must demonstrate unity, organization, and movement.

A question now arises in this last decade of the twentieth century: is there a form that is more effective in accurately speaking the biblical text while at the same time being received comprehensively by the audience? During the past decade a great deal of academic research has been done in the area of human verbal communication, and it is imperative that the preacher of the modern age take advantage of that scientific knowledge.

Sermon construction has always been referred to as an art, but many teachers of homiletics argue that preaching, like Thomas Edison's remark concerning scientific developments, is as much "perspiration" as it is "inspiration." These teachers maintain that "while preaching is art, it is not

artful; there is craft connected with the shaping of sermons."¹ One such advocate is David Buttrick, professor of homiletics at Vanderbilt Divinity School. Buttrick has published several volumes and numerous articles advocating his structuralist approach to homiletics, and in 1987 he published Homiletic, his summa of homiletic construction.

Buttrick's approach to sermon formation is extremely complex; in his book are chapters not only on sermon form itself, but also sections containing the theology of preaching, specific language usage, the use of and need for image and metaphor, style, and authority. All of these concepts are vital to understanding Buttrick's total approach to homiletic, but a complete analysis of each of these notions is far beyond the parameters of this project.

The concern of this project is to seek to discover if there exists a normative form of sermon structure in UCC churches reporting either a decline or an increase in worship attendance, and to ascertain if there is a basic difference in sermon form between those two church types. To accomplish that task it is necessary to have a tool, some measuring stick with which to analyze sermon structure. Buttrick's model of homiletic, with some adaptations and appropriations, provides such an analytic tool. It is not the intention of this project to suggest that Buttrick's model is normative for all effective sermons, nor does it intend to suggest that one can judge the excellence of any sermon simply by the criterion of how well they fit Buttrick's pattern. Rather, his model was chosen because it, of all the models considered, most succinctly addresses the need for unity, organization, and movement and provides very specific guidelines for beginning, development, and ending of sermons. As discussed

¹ David Buttrick, Homiletic, 37.

in the previous chapter, these are concerns which all scholars feel are vital to effective sermon construction.

The limitation of this approach is that it does not provide a means to analyze the sermons by other criteria. For example, Eugene Lowry advocates narrative preaching, basing his theories on Aristotle's Poetics; using an adaptation of the Buttrick model prevents the examination of the sermons for narrativity. The advantage of this approach is that Buttrick does supply a very distinct model with specific elements that, with some adaptation, lend themselves well as tools for the analysis of sermons.

This chapter will limit its discussion of Buttrick's Homiletic only to the aspects of basic sermon form expounded by Buttrick, in an effort to devise a tool for the use of sermon analysis.

The Structuralist Approach

Buttrick's approach to sermon form is based on the foundation of the philosophy of phenomenology. Buttrick does not discuss phenomenology specifically in his book, and admits that he is not a schooled phenomenologist, but he recognizes that others who have studied his work describe him as a phenomenologist.² Likewise he does not identify himself strictly as a structuralist, but throughout his work he discusses in some detail the importance of understanding structures in communication, particularly as it is related to the reader-response method of biblical criticism.³ Since structuralism as a discipline is rooted in phenomenology, it is appropriate for one to conclude that Buttrick's approach at least finds its roots in phenomenology. Clearly his

² Buttrick, Homiletic, xii.

³ Buttrick, Homiletic, 269, 280.

approach to understanding the development of meaning in consciousness is related to phenomenology, but there are other parts of his homiletic that suggest an attempt to go beyond phenomenology to the transcendental ego itself. This is evidenced in his statement that the "presence of God is, after all, a linguistic event, a presence in word."⁴

It is impossible to give a complete discussion of the philosophy of phenomenology in a single chapter; likewise it is unnecessary for the purposes of this project. Since, however, Buttrick's homiletic is rooted in structuralism, which is itself related to phenomenology, a short discussion of the relationship between structuralism, phenomenology, and Buttrick's homiletic is appropriate at this juncture. We will examine two aspects of Buttrick's homiletic as it relates to phenomenology: meaning as it forms in consciousness and the quest for ultimate reality.

Phenomenology itself was founded by Edmund Husserl, who rooted his work in the philosophies of Descartes, Kant, and Hegel.⁵ Phenomenology is concerned with the analysis of consciousness; it is essentially "a descriptive examination of the noetic (that which originates in the mind's activity) and noematic (that which originates in the intentional object) structure of intentional acts as grounded in transcendental subjectivity."⁶ According to this theory, consciousness is "neither a condition nor a faculty but an act, and as such it is always object-directed, always conscious of something."⁷ Thus the

⁴ Buttrick, Homiletic, 8.

⁵ Robert Detweiler, Story, Sign, and Self: Phenomenology and Structuralism as Literary Critical Methods (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 8.

⁶ Detweiler, 8.

⁷ Detweiler, 8-9.

phenomenologist "brackets" ultimate reality, since consciousness does not constitute the world, but only apprehends the world.

Therefore Buttrick cannot be labeled a strict phenomenologist, since his theories do in fact go beyond these brackets. Phenomenology, which is concerned with the analysis of consciousness, deals only with what appears. The phenomenologist would speak of the human response to God, but would not attempt to speak of the reality of God. Yet Buttrick as theologian does suggest that through the sermon one can experience the reality of God; he refers to Paul's words found in Gal. 2:20, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me," as an example of the ultimacy of God in the moment of the Word. In his chapter on the theology of preaching, Buttrick argues that "Word" - the reality of God - always takes flesh.⁸ To that end he states that "Christian preaching not only reveals, it continues the work of Christ by calling, liberating, and forming a new humanity. . . . words are not merely tokens of exchange but . . . they mediate reality, they bring reality into being."⁹ Thus Buttrick's approach reaches beyond strict phenomenology and affirms that one can in fact respond to a reality which is something beyond merely the reality of our response.

Perhaps the clearest example of the relationship of Buttrick's theories to phenomenology exists in his absolute insistence upon the use of methods (example, illustration, and contrapuntals) within the development of the sermon that produce images which reflect back on experiences of the hearer. This is reflective of the idea of intuition, which is an "attitude of utter openness combined with persistent thinking back, that leads one to original perceptions of the

⁸ Buttrick, Homiletic, 450.

⁹ Buttrick, Homiletic, 451-453.

world."¹⁰ Such thinking back is an effort to reunite subject and object, and occurs in the relationship between imagination (the re-creation of experiences through image) and reason (the rational reflection upon and the eventual discovery of meaning through the images).

Robert Detweiler writes of phenomenology that it "does not wish to control the world. . . rather it wishes to reveal the richness, variety, promise and infinite potential of the experience of existence. Life is above all awesome, and phenomenology desires not to domesticate that awesomeness but to make it constantly present to us."¹¹ Certainly that is Buttrick's aim as a Christian preacher, and his use of the phenomenological approach as a tool for that goal is consistent.

Like phenomenology, structuralism is far too complicated for a complete explication within the scope of this project, but there are some notes about structuralism that help one to better understand the theories of David Buttrick.

Michael Lane describes structuralism as "a method whose primary intention is to permit the investigation to go beyond a pure description of what one perceives or experiences, in the direction of the quality of rationality which underlies the social phenomena in which one is concerned."¹² Phenomenology begins with consciousness and seeks to understand how systems are formed from consciousness to create being and meaning; structuralism, on the other hand, begins with systems and seeks to understand

¹⁰ Detweiler, 10.

¹¹ Detweiler, 16.

¹² Quoted in Detweiler, 17.

how those systems form the being and meaning of consciousness.¹³ This is where Buttrick's theories intersect with structuralism; he is concerned with how preachers can devise a sermon whose form provides for meaning beyond the mere collection of words and sentences.

Structuralism is based on the theory of signs; a sign is an arbitrary connection between words and things (a rose by any other name). Out of these arbitrary constructs develops a system of language "that is paradigmatic for the arbitrary formation of all human systems."¹⁴ These signs combine together in structures which give them meaning beyond the meaning of their single existence. A simplistic example is the combination of "tall," a theoretical concept to describe something which is not "short;" and "boy," the arbitrary sign given to a particular gender. Tall boy describes a relationship between the concept and the gender which gives it meaning beyond either of the individual elements. Thus "in every instance it is the structure, the relationship among . . . elements of discourse, and not the individual elements themselves that produces meaning."¹⁵

Buttrick is ultimately concerned with this relationship of elements which produce meaning; he is concerned with the structure of the sermon as a means of producing meaning in consciousness. He would argue that not just any system of words can communicate meaning; to provide an honest and accurate re-creation of what the gospel says in a particular situation, one must seek to understand the structures that form meaning in that particular setting and

¹³ Detweiler, 17.

¹⁴ Detweiler, 18.

¹⁵ Detweiler, 18.

recreate those structures utilizing the modern vernacular.¹⁶ "Meaning is structural. . . . language may glitter, but, if deep structural meaning does not form in congregational consciousness, sermons may be nothing more than oratorical fireworks that flash but do not last."¹⁷

This relates to the concepts of deep structure and surface structure. Ronald Allen suggests a helpful analogy for understanding these concepts: when a builder develops a new residential area, there are generally only four or five basic house plans. These represent the deep structures or universals of housebuilding such as foundation, studs, framing, plumbing, etc. But each house looks different in the end because of particular choices of paint color, carpet, changes in room arrangement, and landscaping. These represent the surface structures. Thus while the content of texts varies significantly, a particular text will manifest one of these limited numbers of patterns which exist in all cultures.¹⁸ The structuralist approach is thus atemporal, that is the meaning exists in the structure, regardless of the archaic nature of the words or metaphors, but it is not ahistorical.

There is no natural relationship among the various discrete elements that make up the structuralist repertoire; that is, while some languages may place the descriptive adjective tall before the noun boy, another language system may place the adjective after the noun. The meaning of the structure between language systems is still the same, regardless of the exact placement in either system. However, within a particular system, placement is vital. "Systems

¹⁶ Buttrick, Homiletic, 306-8.

¹⁷ Buttrick, Homiletic, 316.

¹⁸ Ronald Allen, Contemporary Biblical Interpretation for Preaching (Valley Forge: Judson, 1984), 71.

consist of unique, distinct units conjoined by position rather than by species. Each thing is itself and remains itself; it is not absorbed into the whole . . . but becomes a confederate with other units to comprise the system, the result of pragmatic rather than of familial dynamics.¹⁹ Thus Buttrick's argument that placement of these units (which he refers to as "moves") should be reflective of the deep structures found in the original text, if meaning is to form in congregational consciousness. Thus in sermon construction one seeks to discern the deep structural meaning of a text and then create a sermon that reflects those deep structures. Such a sermon form might follow the narrative structures of an actual story, such as Nathan confronting David (2 Sam. 12:1-15), or seek to develop understanding through the structural interactions of systems of thought in more prose passages, such as Paul's discourse to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 5:17-21).

For Buttrick a sermon is a plotted system of language moving through a theological field forming in consciousness as it goes. Stated more theologically, "preaching. . . is forming the faith consciousness of the church on behalf of Jesus Christ."²⁰

This structuralist approach provides a theoretical basis for rules of sermon form. Buttrick holds that meaning is structural, and therefore plot is all important; preaching must bring out structures of consciousness in the congregation.²¹ To successfully accomplish this task, a sermon must be constructed in such a way as to imitate the way in which consciousness grasps and understands, which is primarily through models and images of lived

¹⁹ Detweiler, 24.

²⁰ Buttrick, Homiletic, 36.

²¹ Buttrick, Homiletic, 296.

experience.²² A congregation, upon receiving a sermon, should not feel that they are being talked to so much as having conceptual meaning form in consciousness as their own thought process.²³

Too often modern homiletics have stated that the task of the preacher is to make the biblical story relevant for today. Buttrick considers this statement to be nonsense, for he argues that when one makes that statement one is suggesting that somehow the biblical text is not relevant on its own, which denies its basis in ultimate truth. It suggests that the structural truths are in fact temporal, which he denies as theologian and as structuralist. The Bible would then simply be reduced to a particular culture's understanding of itself through a particular worldview, which denies that somehow God speaks through the ancient text with some ultimate truth. The structuralist argues that one must see through the biblical narrative, with all its admitted cultural bias and outdated metaphors, to the deep structure itself, which is ultimate, crosscultural, and atemporal.²⁴ One does not seek to make the biblical text relevant, but rather seeks to find the relevance in the biblical text; that is, one must "preach from a structure of contemporary understanding formed by the text."²⁵

Buttrick finds theological reason in his approach: "preaching, as it forms in faith consciousness, is a means of God's self-disclosure and saving grace."²⁶ God talk, as the ultimate of deep structures, is intimately related to structures of

²² Buttrick, Homiletic, 26-27.

²³ Buttrick, Homiletic, 28.

²⁴ Buttrick, Homiletic, 304, 404.

²⁵ Buttrick, Homiletic, 396.

²⁶ Buttrick, Homiletic, 116.

human consciousness; indeed one might suggest that God talk is the ultimate human consciousness.

Such an approach provides an important foundation for preaching and praxis, which demands an alteration in sermon design. Buttrick writes:

Stock sermon structures which merely align human situations with the gospel may not be useful. Thus, familiar patterns such as the "problem-solution" model or the "human quandry-Christian answer" model probably must be amended. We cannot, even structurally, set up the gospel in terms of our human understandings. Instead, somewhere in sermons we must give space to a revision of our understandings in the light of the gospel. Do we imply that preaching will have to be more apologetic than it has been? Probably. In our age, new understandings are forming, and the gospel must relate to such understandings with dialectical vigor. We cannot endorse a prohibition against human hermeneutics prompted by some odd notion of the purity of the gospel. Human understandings are what we have, and, as they probe situations, they can demand profound explications of Christian faith in return. Besides, there is no certifiably pure Christian faith for us to embrace. We grasp faith through human language and, therefore, within epochal thought forms. What we do have is a structure of Christian hermeneutical consciousness within which we may review situations, namely a consciousness in which symbols of revelation are present to a being-saved community.²⁷

The foundation of Buttrick's homiletic is the structuralist approach as both hermenutic and homiletic. Let us now explore the specific ramifications of that approach as it is played out in the actual construction of the sermon form.

The Three Principal Divisions of Form

The Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 2, virtually every homiletic theory requires some sort of beginning or introduction. The homiletic of David Buttrick is no

²⁷ Buttrick, Homiletic, 418.

exception. While in the discussion in Chapter 2 the word "beginning" rather than "introduction" was used as the word to describe the opening words of a sermon, Buttrick is very clear in his preference for the word introduction. In Buttrick's homiletical approach, one does not begin a sermon, but rather introduces it in a very specific and intentional manner.

For many theorists, the purpose of an introduction is to lay out a map of the path about to be taken by the speaker, so that the audience, with prior knowledge of the route, might be better able to listen and comprehend the journey along the way. Buttrick agrees with this idea, but not in the exact manner in which the introduction is used by many speakers. For many, the introduction should lay out the scheme of what is to come, telling the audience in short, thesis-like statements, what material is about to be covered in the body or development section of the presentation. This scheme fits in with research which indicates that people need to hear information three times before it becomes committed to memory; so the speaker presents the information first in the introduction, outlines it more completely in the body, and then summarizes what has been said in the conclusion. The theory is that thus presented in the three-fold manner, the information is committed to memory.

Such strategy is appropriate if the desire of the oral presentation is to have the audience commit to memory certain pieces of information. If however, the desire of the oral presentation is something else, such as changing consciousness, another approach to introduction might be more effective. The latter course is reflective of the structuralist desire, so it comes as no surprise that the introduction for Buttrick is not simply a laying out of a map of the territory to follow. In fact he is adamant that the introduction should not give away the structure of a sermon. He argues that this destroys suspense, and that "human thought is intriguing precisely because human beings think and speak

differently, so that we are continually surprised by turns of the mind or sudden shifts in imagination."²⁸ The desire of the preacher is to effect consciousness, and if the preacher enumerates in the introduction points which are to follow, the audience will decide ahead of time what their thoughts on those points are, and the preacher will have lost the opportunity to affect consciousness.

Following the structuralist philosophy, Buttrick holds that the "primary purpose of an introduction is to focus congregational consciousness with a hermeneutical orientation."²⁹ In an effort to focus congregational consciousness, the introduction in a sermon should not simply "tell them what you are going to tell them," but rather should set the stage for the sermon proper, much as the prologue in a play or musical serves to focus the attention of the audience on the stage and the presentation that is to come. A shift must be made from the wider world of concerns and thoughts and problems which the audience brings with them to the moment of presentation, to the much smaller and more focused world of the presentation moment. Introduction serves, in the broadest sense, as a transition from world to moment.

With focused consciousness, the congregation is now prepared to be introduced to the moment. This involves the providing of some sort of hermeneutic, or how it is that the preacher wants the congregation to hear the sermon.³⁰ The illustration Buttrick uses is the story of Jesus walking on water. If one were to present this story to an educated, middle-class congregation as history, it would more than likely be met with a great deal of skepticism. If however, the preacher were to structure the introduction in such a fashion as to

²⁸ Buttrick, Homiletic, 85.

²⁹ Buttrick, Homiletic, 95.

³⁰ Buttrick, Homiletic, 91.

focus on the water-walking not as an historical fact but as a picture of faith, then the audience has been oriented as to how they should listen to the sermon.³¹ The hermeneutic has been presented in a short, concise form, and the consciousness of the congregation has been focused on the world of the moment.

An introduction must focus congregational consciousness with a hermeneutical orientation, and Buttrick has very strict guidelines for how this is to be accomplished. First: an introduction should be no more than seven to twelve sentences in length.³² Such brevity is important because the introduction serves merely to focus, and bears no weight of meaning; too long an introduction can serve to alienate an audience. Buttrick offers no research or statistic to back up this notion, with the exception of some anecdotal incidents. He merely states that "getting into focus can be accomplished rather quickly," and that the seven to twelve sentence guideline is "not arbitrary."³³

The first two or three sentences of an introduction must not "bear too much weight" in Buttrick's homiletic.³⁴ Human speech and syntax are quite varied, and he argues that it takes some moments for a congregation to get used to the syntax of the preacher. It takes two or three sentences for the congregation to focus on the preacher so that the preacher can focus the audience on a field of meaning. This does not mean that the preacher should tell a joke to get the audience warmed up. Such an artificial construction serves

³¹ Buttrick, Homiletic, 90.

³² Buttrick, Homiletic, 85.

³³ Buttrick, Homiletic, 86.

³⁴ Buttrick, Homiletic, 89.

only to distract focus and consciousness; manuals on public speaking often suggest telling a joke to get the audience on the speakers side, but presumably the congregation is already on the side of the preacher, and to tell a joke (which often has nothing to do with the focus of the sermon) serves only to distract and delay. The first sentences should be connected to the sermon whole; it is only that they should not bear much weight of meaning. Thus these sentences should be fairly short and pointed, speaking clearly to the issue to be covered, and in fact serve to introduce the introduction. The opening sentences should begin to move the congregation to a field of meaning and focus of consciousness.

The middle six to eight sentences must serve double duty, because it is within these sentences that the issue, theme, or mood is established as well as the manner in which the issue, theme, or mood shall be explored. Focus and hermeneutical orientation must occur in these sentences, which is no small task.³⁵

The last sentence of the introduction must stop action.³⁶ Buttrick argues that it is the most difficult sentence in the introduction to write, since it must clearly establish a separation between the introduction and the moves to follow. Consciousness has been focused, the hermeneutic has been exposed: now the preacher must close that task and begin the process of moving the consciousness of the congregation along a prescribed course. To effect this movement is vital, for if the congregation is left standing at the introduction, the next twenty minutes are wasted.

³⁵ Buttrick, Homiletic, 88.

³⁶ Buttrick, Homiletic, 87.

Buttrick also lists a group of introduction types which he believes are problematic; although these conventions are current in sermon form, he believes they are detrimental to effective preaching. He lists five ineffective introduction forms, including humor, which was discussed above. The other forms include the step-down introduction, which is seen in preachers who start a sermon on a verse found in, say, one of Paul's letters to the church in Corinth, by describing Corinth, Paul's travels there, the establishment of the church, the make-up of the congregation, and then finally begins to preach on Paul's teaching concerning the Lord's Supper. Congregational consciousness has moved from Corinth to Paul to his travels to the church and finally to the Lord's Supper. Buttrick argues that by this point the congregation has lost interest and focus, and therefore the introduction has failed in its purpose.³⁷

Another ineffective introduction is the tangential intrusion, which is an aside, witty or clever remark, or any other statement which does not continue the process of focus.³⁸

A fourth approach is labeled the oblique suspense. This approach seems to stem from film and popular fiction, and it involves holding back information so as to build up a sense of increasing suspense. The audience does not know the cast of characters, or where the action is occurring, and this is supposed to bring them to the edge of their seats just waiting for the next bit of information. The problem with such an introduction is that it totally fails to focus consciousness, which is one primary task of the introduction.³⁹ And it is

³⁷ Buttrick, Homiletic, 97.

³⁸ Buttrick, Homiletic, 93.

³⁹ Buttrick, Homiletic, 94.

doubtful that folks are really sitting on the edge of their seats waiting for the next clue in the theological murder mystery.

The final common, ineffective introduction is referred to as personal narrative. This is a growing trend, as more and more preachers try to relate to their congregations. The problem with such an approach is that congregational consciousness then focuses on the preacher, and not on the material. Such split focus is devastating to an effective sermon. Buttrick suggests that if a preacher wants to relate to his/her congregation, then s/he should spend more time in pastoral visitation.⁴⁰

Moves

As discussed in Chapter 2, every effective sermon demonstrates movement, which is the sequential arrangement of sections for a particular cumulative effect. The body of the sermon as Buttrick sees it consists of a series of moves, which are "formed modules of language arranged in some sequential pattern."⁴¹ Following the structuralist approach to the understanding of language, Buttrick maintains that a move must be constructed in such a way as to "form in consciousness to pattern an understanding."⁴² For the structuralist, the value of words is not as individual symbols, but rather as a collection of symbols that resonate one of the deep structures of meaning. Thus each move must be constructed in such a fashion as to resemble normal human conversation patterns, for speaking imitates the way in which consciousness

⁴⁰ Buttrick, Homiletic, 96.

⁴¹ Buttrick, Homiletic, 23.

⁴² Buttrick, Homiletic, 24.

grasps and understands.⁴³ Moves are, therefore, composed of subordinate gambits of thought.

Buttrick maintains that the formation of consciousness in a group setting is very different from individual conversation. This means that while the patterns of structure found in the sermon moves must be similar to those found in common speech, each move must also reflect the fact that while a particular concept may need only one sentence to form meaning into consciousness in a personal conversation, that same concept might need three or four sentences to form in group consciousness.⁴⁴

Likewise, Buttrick argues that the attention span of an audience is much shorter than the attention span of an individual in conversation (which he supports by directing his readers to Madison Avenue and the thirty-second sound bite for advertisement; he argues that if it didn't work, advertisers would not use it.).⁴⁵ This means that each move of a sermon should be no more than four minutes in length, and thus there should be no more than four or five moves to a twenty minute sermon.⁴⁶

In Buttrick's homiletic theory, the move is the vital structure within the sermon. To successfully communicate, which means to successfully structure meaning into the consciousness of the listener, each move must be unified, that is, it can make one and only one statement.⁴⁷ To accomplish this unity, each

⁴³ Buttrick, Homiletic, 24-27.

⁴⁴ Buttrick, Homiletic, 25-26.

⁴⁵ Buttrick, Homiletic, 25.

⁴⁶ Buttrick, Homiletic, 25-26.

⁴⁷ Buttrick, Homiletic, 49.

move is shaped by the interaction of theological understanding, oppositions, and actualities of lived experience.⁴⁸

Preaching within the context of the church necessitates theology, the discussion of God. Each move must reflect some theological meaning, which provides for the audience the images and metaphors for the living of life.⁴⁹ For Buttrick, preaching always emerges from a biblical context, and thus each move should contain within it some reflection on that context. This most assuredly does not mean a historical study of each passage of scripture, nor a complicated explication of the precise meaning and etymology of the word "breath" as it is used in the Hebrew language. Rather, each move should, through the use of image and metaphor, propel consciousness toward an understanding of God.

Critics within the structuralist school look for the presence of oppositions within the text; therefore each move must be designed in such a way "as to identify and differentiate oppositions."⁵⁰ These oppositions include not only those found within the biblical text itself, but those cultural oppositions that people bring with them to the preaching event (which in some instances may be the oppositions found within the text itself).

These oppositions include worldview and current social attitudes. Congregations do not show up for worship as empty slates ready to be filled; they come with many ideas of how the world is supposed to run, and those ideas are often reflections of current trends in psychology, theology, or a host of other "-ologies" running rampant in society. An example of such a cultural

⁴⁸ Buttrick, Homiletic, 34.

⁴⁹ Buttrick, Homiletic, 29-30.

⁵⁰ Buttrick, Homiletic, 32.

opposition can be seen in the "I'm OK - You're OK" psychology of Eric Berne, which was so popular during the mid-seventies. Everyone came to church believing that they were OK, which stands in direct opposition to a theology of the Cross which states that Jesus died for the sins of humanity. If everyone was in fact OK, then the concept of sin either had to be addressed as an archaic, culturally limited notion, or avoided entirely (which became the norm); thus it was that many pulpits began preaching the psychology of Eric Berne rather than the theology of Jesus Christ.

These concerns of theology and opposition are addressed by the use of actualities of lived experience. This means that the preacher should not talk about how people are sinners, but rather should seek to discover how it is that people actually have a consciousness of "I am a sinner." This is achieved through image, more specifically the use of example and illustration, discussed more completely below. "Preaching does not persuade in the sense of arguing the truth of the gospel; preaching sets the gospel in lived experience, genuine experience, so the truth will be acknowledged."⁵¹

As to the actual construction of each move, Buttrick has very strict guidelines. In addition to being at most four minutes in length, each move must begin with a single idea and end with a single idea.⁵² The first three sentences of each move will embody "content, connective logic, perspective and mood;"⁵³ the point of view must remain the same in each move;⁵⁴ and each move will

⁵¹ Buttrick, Homiletic, 33.

⁵² Buttrick, Homiletic, 51, 70.

⁵³ Buttrick, Homiletic, 79.

⁵⁴ Buttrick, Homiletic, 62.

have at most one example or one illustration.⁵⁵ To discuss in any more detail the exact arrangement of specific parts within a move is beyond the range of this project; suffice it to say that specific arrangement is very complicated, and took Buttrick some 300 pages to outline.

As scholars over the past century have maintained that a preacher should use a variety of styles in preaching, Buttrick maintains that within his system a preacher must be willing to change styles move by move.⁵⁶ This is necessary because not everyone hears in the same fashion. For some people images that recreate aural experiences have the most impact; for others intellectual concepts provide the easiest to comprehend images; for yet others a narrative that creates a word picture is necessary for meaning to be achieved in consciousness. To accommodate all the various learning styles it is necessary for the preacher to use a variety of approaches to successfully communicate to a majority of people.

The use of example and illustration in moves. Buttrick, like Craddock, believes that preaching is not an intellectual exercise alone, but rather should in some way provide for experience in the listener. Thus it is necessary for the preacher to use a variety of images that resonate memories in consciousness and thus produce a new meaning out of historical experiences. This is most effectively achieved by the use of examples and illustrations, which resonate lived memories in consciousness. To talk about God's forgiveness in the abstract is worthless; to bring into consciousness the memory of a time when the listener was forgiven, by a parent or friend or spouse, makes the concept of

⁵⁵ Buttrick, Homiletic, 133-35.

⁵⁶ Buttrick, Homiletic, 78.

God's forgiveness real in the consciousness of the listener. Thus at its simplest, examples and illustrations increase understanding or bolster credence.⁵⁷

Examples and illustrations are the actualities of lived experience that help the listener to comprehend the theological meaning and contrapuntals of a text.

Buttrick makes a distinction between example and illustration: "examples emerge from common congregational consciousness whereas illustrations are brought to a congregation from beyond the sphere of shared experience."⁵⁸

An example is either a "moment in consciousness or a simple narrative."⁵⁹ A moment in consciousness is how things strike people, while a simple narrative is a brief plot involving interaction.⁶⁰ Buttrick of course has some very strict rules about the length and specific use of an example (no more than three chained examples in a move) or illustration (no more than one illustration per move, and not each move needs an illustration), but once again that is more than this project needs to explore. Suffice it to say that to create images within a move it is necessary to utilize some form of example and/or illustration to create meaning in the consciousness of the congregation.

The need for transition from one move to the next. Buttrick believes that transitions should occur naturally and logically, as they do in conversation, where there is a flow to thought and language; transitions occur in conversation by kinds of logical associations, not by labored transition. He argues that too often sermons are arbitrarily enumerated and artificially broken into parts, which

⁵⁷ Buttrick, Homiletic, 127.

⁵⁸ Buttrick, Homiletic, 128.

⁵⁹ Buttrick, Homiletic, 131.

⁶⁰ Buttrick, Homiletic, 131.

thus makes it necessary to construct some sort of transition from one part to the next part. This impedes the flow of discourse according to Buttrick's thought, and in fact causes dissonance because the audience has fixed on one idea and suddenly the meaning which has formed in consciousness is being interrupted.⁶¹

Since a sermon is a "sequence of ideas, moves, within a movement of thought,"⁶² Buttrick holds that a sermon should not need transition sentences at all. Rather a preacher should focus on constructing a sermon that can be said to have a logic of consciousness; that is, the various moves travel by natural association which shows up in "connectives - 'but,' 'and,' 'yet,' 'so' - and sometimes by dialectical oppositions."⁶³ Thus transition between moves is accomplished through the natural flow of ideas which are separate units yet revolve around a single topic or idea. The problem is not in constructing good transitions, but rather in making sure that a central idea is followed throughout the sermon, allowing moves to flow one to another in a manner similar to the natural flow of conversation. If a transition sentence or paragraph is necessary to connect one move to another, then the sermon fails in its primary task, which is to introduce a unified concept to the audience. Transitions are necessary only if we are attempting to preach by categorical design, and not by flow of consciousness.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Buttrick, Homiletic, 70.

⁶² Buttrick, Homiletic, 70.

⁶³ Buttrick, Homiletic, 71.

⁶⁴ Buttrick, Homiletic, 70.

Conclusions

In Chapter 2 it was suggested that ending was a better term to use for the last section of a sermon than conclusion. Buttrick however, like his insistence on introduction, is very clear that he does not want an ending, but a conclusion, to the sermon. Conclusions, according to Buttrick are, by design, meant to conclude or end the sermon. The conclusion should be in simple and concrete language, and no more than five to eight sentences in length.⁶⁵ A conclusion should not introduce new ideas or images (which would make it a move), but rather should be a weaving together of thoughts and images of previous moves.⁶⁶ This does not mean that the conclusion should be a repetition of points in the sermon, which Buttrick believes is a redundancy and results in people blanking out during the conclusion.⁶⁷

A conclusion is governed by intention; if the desire is to inspire action, then the conclusion should be designed such that people are ready to leap to their feet and get to work. If the wish of a particular sermon is to cause listeners to reflect on their lives, then the conclusion should be structured in such a way as to allow that to happen in the consciousness of the listener. Conclusions should vary from sermon to sermon, dependent upon the intention of the sermon. If a conclusion is always the same, the audience will know what to expect and the preacher will become ineffective (as well as boring).⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Buttrick, Homiletic, 98.

⁶⁶ Buttrick, Homiletic, 102.

⁶⁷ Buttrick, Homiletic, 101.

⁶⁸ Buttrick, Homiletic, 97-102.

Buttrick lists several items to avoid in a conclusion, which include ending the sermon with a question, using a quotation, returning to the introduction (which forms a sort of "hermeneutical circle"), or the recitation of a personal testimony to give credence to ideas already in consciousness.⁶⁹

Foremost, says Buttrick, a conclusion must end the sermon, and the last three sentences of the conclusion should put the sermon to rest, which means that an idea has become fixed in consciousness.⁷⁰

A Critique of Buttrick's Homiletic

Buttrick's structuralist approach to sermon design is very complex and very rigid in its approach. Certainly the form he advocates contains within it all of the elements that teachers of homiletics from the past century have indicated are imperative to good preaching. His approach is very concerned with the three primary requisites of form discussed in Chapter 2, which are unity, organization, and movement. Clearly his ideas relating to sermon form demand the utmost clarity in those requisites, and those ideas are grounded in the structuralist approach to understanding. While all modern scholars of homiletic are concerned with unity, Buttrick is rabid about it. Throughout his volume it is clearly stated that if a story or image or concept or discussion is going to introduce a new idea into consciousness other than the idea first broached in the introduction, than said stories, images, etc., no matter how clever, must not be used. To do so disrupts unity and foils movement, as it introduces a sidetrack to the journey undertaken in the first sentences of the sermon. His ideas on organization are based on structuralist theory, and, based on that theory, are very consistent. David Bartlett suggests that the great strength of

⁶⁹ Buttrick, Homiletic, 103-6.

⁷⁰ Buttrick, Homiletic, 97.

Buttrick's Homiletic is that "he makes us think about what and how congregations really hear. . . . (but) what is least persuasive. . . is the claim that all people hear in very much the same way and we can be quite sure what that way is."⁷¹ In other words, does meaning form in consciousness in precisely the numerical and sequential pattern that Buttrick suggests?

Likewise, his basic outline of sermon form shows the three principal divisions of form: beginning, development, and ending. He is very clear on the importance of each part in its contribution to the whole, and has very strict guidelines for length of introduction and conclusion. This shows how seriously he takes the importance of those divisions. His strategy for development is clear and concise, again filled with some very strict guidelines.

One point of confusion concerning Buttrick's approach is that he at times suggests that in order to demonstrate effective preaching, it is necessary for the audience to remember the sermon. Much of his research and studies are concerned with the ability of an audience to remember the sermon. Yet this seems to contradict his emphasis on transformation, that is, a change in consciousness. It is difficult to discern exactly which he believes is primary; one could argue that to simply remember a sermon may be too narrow a view of effectiveness; if one person out of one hundred has some sort of experience as a result of the sermon that brings hope or truth to him/her, does it matter if the other ninety-nine remember anything or not?

Buttrick defends his homiletic form as scientific and based on research. Numerous times in his book he makes reference to studies, or research, or writes that there is evidence to support a point. But he does not document that evidence or research. It is not footnoted, nor is it referenced in his bibliography.

⁷¹ David L. Bartlett, "Story and Narrative: History and Claims," Interpretation 45, no. 3 (July 1991): 237.

Two of his professional colleagues, who wish to remain anonymous, suggest that there is in fact no hard evidence upon which he can base his assertions. They indicate that several times they asked to see the so-called studies, but that they were always put off. Their conclusion is that the evidence is anecdotal at best, and should be treated as such. They maintain that in conversation with Buttrick they asked him about his research, and he spoke of discussions around the lunch table, and other such similar types of interaction. One would question that such anecdotal evidence can be referred to as research.

Thus it is that perhaps the biggest criticism of Buttrick's homiletic is that he tries desperately to approach preaching as a science, and as such may not be entirely precise as to the basis of his theories. In the opinion of the author, Buttrick has some important contributions to make to homiletics, and may in fact be advocating what is the most effective sermon form currently available. The problem is that by presenting that form as scientifically verifiable, about which there is some question, Buttrick may be casting doubt on his own theories.

For example, the idea that an introduction can only be eight to twelve sentences in length is questionable. It is an interesting concept, and if there is evidence that such length is optimum, then that evidence should be produced. But to make such a statement without solid evidence is to call into question the whole approach. Why not nine to thirteen sentences? And does sentence length matter? Three words can make a sentence; is that somehow different from a thirty word sentence? Why? Evidence should be produced if such evidence exists.

In a discussion between the author and Eugene Lowry, professor of preaching at St. Paul's School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri, and an advocate of narrative preaching, Lowry stated that he thought that Buttrick's so-called "moves" are in fact mis-named. He suggested that Buttrick's moves

would be better referred to as "stops," for in these formed modules of language one does not move, but rather pauses to reflect on an image or idea created within that particular moment. In contrasting his own approach of narrative with Buttrick's homiletic, Lowry suggested that if one were to visualize preaching as a string of pearls, narrative is concerned with the string while Buttrick is concerned with each individual pearl. This of course suggests that narrative preaching and the homiletic of Buttrick could be merged.⁷²

Lowry also reported that at a gathering of the Academy of Homiletics, Buttrick was explaining his approach, and someone asked him about all the rules for sermon construction which one finds in his work. Buttrick responded that if someone did not like a page of the rules he suggested, then that page should be ripped out. There are several possible explanations for that statement; Lowry suggests that it demonstrates Buttrick's arrogance. Another participant in that meeting, J. Irwin Trotter, professor of homiletics at the School of Theology at Claremont differs with Lowry. He believes that what Buttrick meant by that statement is that his work is preliminary and always open to change and adaptation. What Buttrick was saying was that preaching is vitally important and people must constantly work and re-work theories to find the best model of delivery possible at any given moment in history.⁷³

An Appropriation of Moves and Structures for Sermon Analysis

The stated purpose of this project is to examine sermon form in churches which show an increase in worship attendance and in churches which show a decrease in worship attendance. The hope of such analysis is that a normative form will be discovered which may then be labeled effective or ineffective, as it relates to worship attendance. Portions of Buttrick's homiletic provide such a

⁷² Eugene Lowry, discussion with author, 10 Feb. 1991.

⁷³ J. Irwin Trotter, discussion with author, 7 Jan. 1992.

tool; because of the complexity of his theories relating not only to form but to language usage and theology of preaching, only certain portions of his homiletic will be used for analysis. Unless someone is a devotee of Buttrick and his thought, it is doubtful that anyone would come up with such a concise sermon form. It is important to note that using Buttrick's model does not suggest that it is normative, except in the sense of providing a basic tool with which to analyze other sermons. There may in fact be other tools with which one could analyze sermons, but any research must limit itself to a certain degree. Thus it is that Buttrick's model was chosen simply as a tool, and not as an example of the ultimate in effective sermon construction.

Following the conclusions discovered in Chapter 2 of this project relating to principal divisions of form, which were reiterated in the discussion of Buttrick's homiletic, the analysis will thus consist of three major points, using Buttrick's terms for those points: introduction, moves, and conclusion.

Introduction

Does each sermon have an identifiable introduction? How long (in terms of number of sentences) is each introduction? Does the introduction suggest one, or more than one, point for discussion? Does it establish a hermeneutic? Does the introduction develop images through the use of example or illustration? Is the introduction one of those which Buttrick labels as problematic?"

Moves

How many moves or thought units are evident in the sermon? Does each move make a single, or multiple, point? Is example or illustration used in each or any of the moves? How many times? Does each move relate to the point raised in the introduction? How long (in numbers of sentences) is each

move? Does each move follow a specific pattern, or is variety of style in evidence?

Conclusion

Is there a conclusion? How long (in terms of number of sentences) is it? Does it introduce new material? Are any examples or illustrations used in the conclusion? Does it conclude? Does the conclusion relate to the point first made in the introduction? Does the conclusion fit the description of any of those types which Buttrick maintains must be avoided?

Using this basic tool for analysis, we will now examine a series of sermons from churches reporting an increase in worship attendance, and a series of sermons from churches reporting a decrease in worship attendance to discover if there is any discernable pattern in the form of preaching in these identified settings.

CHAPTER 4

An Analysis of Sermons from Churches Reporting an Increase in Worship Attendance

Nothing is more sought after today by laypersons and preachers alike than a meaningful sound from the pulpit. They both know, even if they cannot say it, that the Word is neither thunder nor angel speech. What it is, or what it should be, however, is another matter.

Clyde Fant, Preaching for Today

This chapter consists of a formal analysis of sermons from five United Church of Christ preachers, using the tool developed from the homiletic of David Buttrick, found in Chapter 3. The preachers were selected based on the reports of increasing worship attendance over the period 1987-1989, and the representative sermons used for analysis were selected according to the criterion outlined in Chapter 2. The preachers selected represent one from each of five geographical locations: Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Northwest, and Southwest, and the results of the analysis are presented by geographical location.

In each sermon this writer looked at the beginning, development, and ending of the sermon, utilizing the tools and questions developed in Chapter 3. By this process it could be determined if a normative form of sermon structure exists among these five preachers. If a norm is discovered, this would suggest that there is a form of sermon which one could label as effective, using the definition for effective found in Chapter 1.

A formal discussion of the findings of this analysis, along with the conclusions of the analysis of sermons from churches reporting a decline in worship attendance, is found in Chapter 6.

Northeast

The analysis of the sermons from the Northeast region reveal no similarity what-so-ever to the theories of David Buttrick. Virtually every rule that Buttrick holds sacred in effective sermon construction was disregarded, with introduction length ranging from two to twenty-two sentences in length; the average number of moves per sermon being 9.4 (the mean being nine); and an average of 14.4 different themes discernable in the sermons, with a mean of thirteen. There was virtually no conclusion in two of the sermons, and the remaining three sermons had conclusions of an average of two sentences in length, usually reiterating a number of the main points made in the sermons - a type of sermon conclusion which Buttrick states must be avoided. Each of the five sermons can be clearly labeled as deductive types. It is also worth mentioning that from the perspective of this project author, it is impossible to identify a clear and consistent theology throughout the sermons.

Beginning

Each introduction of the five was one of the types which Buttrick labels as inappropriate, with four of the five sermons beginning with humorous narratives; the other introduction was a personal narrative, another type on Buttrick's list of dysfunctional introductions. The favorite approach of this preacher appeared to be the use of a humorous narrative, which he then links to the main theme of the sermon. While some might argue that a story does in fact focus consciousness, Buttrick argues otherwise. Only one of the introductions appeared to present a theme that served as the focal point of the entire sermon, and there was only one sermon that introduced a hermeneutic through the introduction.

Development

Again, all the structural rules of Buttrick's homiletic were completely disregarded. There was an average of 9.4 moves per sermon, ranging from

eight moves to thirteen moves. The length of each move ranged from one to twenty-five sentences, with the average move being 11.7 sentences in length. There was no definite pattern of use of example or illustration in the moves; some moves had no examples or illustrations, others had four or five. The use of illustrations seemed to be very bunched; either there was no use of illustration or example, or there were several used to develop a single move. Whenever an illustration was used, it was used as an allegory and the illustration or example was then explained. In three of the sermons the points to be made were numbered, although the number of points did not equal the number of themes introduced, and at times enumeration was begun but not completed; that is the words "In the first place. . ." were used, but there was no second or third or any other place mentioned.

Ending

In two of the sermons there was virtually no conclusion, unless one were to identify the story found in the last move as a conclusion. In a third sermon, the conclusion introduced an entirely new theme from any introduced previously. The final two sermons had conclusions which represented an enumeration and reiteration of some (but not all) of the points made in some previous moves. In only one sermon did the theme of the conclusion match the theme of the introduction; in the other sermons the conclusion (if present) matched themes which had been introduced in the first or second moves of the sermon.

In the sermons from the Northeast participant there was virtually no use of introduction or conclusion in the sense defined by Buttrick or by the theorists examined in Chapter 2. The movement of the sermon was not a flow of consciousness as described by Buttrick; in several instances moves of short length were required, which were actually transition moves. In none of the

sermons was there a single, consistent theme, but rather a number of themes that could be identified as having peripheral relationship to the first theme or topic introduced, either in the introduction or one of the early moves.

Southeast

Once again many of the basic rules of structure suggested by Buttrick for effective sermon form were conspicuous by their absence, although one can see that some of the other theoretical concepts, such as use of oppositions, examples and illustration, were used according to Buttrick's homiletic. The number of moves per sermon averaged six, with two of the sermons having eight moves each. Each move contained a number of examples or illustrations, but virtually every example or illustration was a personal narrative of the preacher, which Buttrick claims is entirely inappropriate. Likewise each sermon contained at least three asides, several sentence's in length, which had nothing to do with the sermon proper; in several instances the preacher even announced: "This is an aside, but . . ." Consequently there were a large number of transition moves or sentences required to bring the audience back to focus on the theme presented.

Not one of the sermons introduced a topic or theme and then remained with that particular topic or theme. In three of the sermons the number of moves equaled the number of topics presented.

In every instance a hermeneutic was established in the introduction or opening section, which is consistent with Buttrick's theories. Three of the sermons contained opening sections which would best be referred to as preludes, which were then followed by an introduction. The conclusions were always a rephrasing of the scriptural text used for the sermon theme.

Oppositions were used quite often and in a variety of ways in this collection of sermons. Sometimes oppositions would be presented within a

single move, while at other times one move would bring up one point, and then the following move would bring up its opposition. Based on certain emphasis placed on social action and the gospel identified in these sermons, one might conclude that this particular preacher falls within the liberal camp.

Beginning

The length of the introductions ranged from six to eighteen sentences; in several instances there were opening remarks that might best be referred to as a "prelude," which was generally used to give some historical background or context to the sermon proper. A hermeneutic was always established in the introduction, though that particular hermeneutic might not be followed throughout the entire sermon.

Development

There was very little consistency in the use of moves in the various sermons, which demonstrated the ability of this preacher to shift styles from move to move, which is an approach that Buttrick advocates. There was great use of example and illustration in virtually every move, although generally several examples and illustrations would be used to explain one particular point. As many as five examples would be strung together, along with an illustration, which Buttrick would suggest is overkill. Every example and illustration, with the exception of two instances of referring to books, was a personal narrative from the life of the preacher. At times it was difficult to discern whether the illustration was designed to prove the scripture or the scripture designed to support the illustration.

Oppositions were used throughout all the sermons, and in a variety of manners. In many instances one move would represent one side of a particular picture, while the next move would represent the other side.

Moves ranged in length from four to fifty-six sentences. One theme was never consistent throughout the entire sermon; in three instances the number of moves was equivalent to the number of themes addressed in the sermon itself.

Ending

Every conclusion was a recitation or paraphrasing of the scripture upon which the sermon was based. Each conclusion was within the suggested number of sentences suggested by Buttrick, but instead of concluding, which Buttrick argues that a conclusion must do, the endings formed more of a hermeneutical circle, taking the auditor back to the beginning. In two instances the conclusions included new information or a challenge not previously introduced in the sermon, against which Buttrick argues.

Midwest

The sermons from the midwest region followed more closely the theories of structure suggested by Buttrick, particularly as his ideas relate to the notion of a single theme and unity. Whereas the Northeast representative, and to a lesser degree the Southeast representative, had an extremely large number of themes running throughout the sermons, the Midwest representative tended, in most instances, to stick to a single theme or a variant of that theme. Conclusions were minimal, and tended to introduce new material, specifically how salvation in Jesus related to the topic. It would not be surprising if this preacher had an altar call following the sermon, for the ending in every sermon was clearly a call to conversion or some demonstration of faithfulness. The theology was consistently simplistic and conservative, with Jesus appearing to be the answer to all the problems raised.

There was not one definite pattern throughout the sermons analyzed, although the number of moves ranged from four to six (a narrow range), a hermeneutic was always introduced early in the sermon (not always in the

introduction, but certainly by the conclusion of the first move), and generally consciousness was focused by the end of the first move.

Throughout the sermons there was a constant use of oppositions, particularly cultural oppositions, which Buttrick considers important to the focusing of consciousness. The oppositions were primarily cultural, that is, they were demonstrations of what culture said was acceptable but which the biblical mandate suggests is unacceptable, which seems consistent with a conservative theology.

Beginning

The introductions ranged in length from eight to thirteen sentences, which is definitely within the range suggested by Buttrick's theories. Some theme was introduced in each introduction, although it was not always the major theme of the sermon. In one instance the introduction seemed to be more of a prologue than an introduction; it was a story that set the stage for the remainder of the sermon. The use of the introduction was inconsistent; there was the instance mentioned above, with introduction as prologue, one instance where the introduction was a diatribe against cultural values (an opposition which was addressed from a theological perspective in later moves), and one occasion where the introduction presented three different themes which were linked together in the moves of the sermon. Generally the introduction (beginning is really a more appropriate term in this instance) included some form of recitation of the biblical scripture upon which the sermon was based. There was consistent use of example and illustration in the introduction which represented an attempt to focus and image consciousness on a theme.

Development

The number of moves was generally consistent with Buttrick's theory concerning an audience's ability to focus on a single topic for a short period of

time. The moves used a variety of styles, which is also consistent with Buttrick's theories. However, the moves did not always focus on the theme addressed in the beginning, and at times actually introduced a new theme or topic for consideration. There was considerably less intrusion of new topics in these sermons than in those found in the Northeast or Southeast samples, with only three of the five sermons straying from a central topic for consideration. Virtually every move had example, illustration, or both, and consistent use was made of contrapuntals throughout the sermons examined.

The moves themselves were not always internally unified; there tended to be a number of tangential intrusions and asides which did not deal primarily with the topic at hand. The moves did not always flow naturally into one another, and transition sentences (or in two instances, transition moves) were required to travel from one move to the next.

Ending

The conclusions (again, the word ending is really more appropriate for this case) were mostly redundant and often introduced new material, specifically some sort of call to faithfulness or conversion. As stated earlier, it is probable that, given this pattern, there is an altar call very soon after the sermon. Generally the conclusions were a listing or restating of points made in the sermon, and did not really conclude.

Northwest

The introductions, moves, and conclusions found in the samples from the Northwest tended to follow very closely Buttrick's ideas concerning optimal length; all the introductions were between eight and twelve sentences in length, and no conclusion was more than eight sentences in length. The number of moves ranged from three to six, with the average being four moves per sermon.

Length, however, is the only place where these sermons follow Buttrick's ideas of effective sermon construction.

None of the introductions presented topics or themes which were consistently followed throughout the sermon, nor was any specific hermeneutic presented. There was very little use of example or illustration, with a total of only seven examples or illustrations used in all of the sermons combined; use of example or illustration was primarily in the form of personal narrative, which, according to Buttrick's theories, is absolutely detrimental to proper sermon form. None of the conclusions directly related to the topic identified in the introduction; in each conclusion there was the presenting of new material, in three out of five cases material which did not relate to any former topic identified in the sermon.

It is probable that the author of these sermons uses a form of cultural historical criticism as his primary tool of exegesis. Virtually every sermon had long explanations of particular words or the historical/cultural setting. One might argue that the thrust of these sermons was biblical trivia, and is reminded of Fosdick's rejoinder that no one really cares about what happened to the Jebusites.

In every sermon scripture was read as a part of the sermon text, not only at the beginning but throughout the entire sermon. Various scriptures were used to illustrate arguments, and the number of scripture passages read in the sermons ranged from three to five. Often the passages were expositized after reading, making it seem as though every time a new scripture was read there would be a new topic for consideration. There was no evidence of thematic unity in any of the sermons analyzed.

Beginning

The introductions of these sermons followed Buttrick's suggested optimal length, with every introduction ranging from eight to twelve sentences in length.

Some of the sections labeled introduction might be better referred to as prologues, since often the beginning was a reading of the scripture which was to be the focus of the sermon. None of the introductions presented a hermeneutic, nor was there any use of example or illustration to focus consciousness. Each introduction did present a theme or topic for consideration, but that theme was not focused upon in all the moves of the sermon. Personal narrative was used in three of the introductions, which is inappropriate according to Buttrick's approach.

Development

The number of moves per sermon was consistent with Buttrick's theories, but every new move also introduced a new topic for consideration, which violates both Buttrick's approach and the desire for thematic unity expressed by scholars during the past century. The number of topics in each sermon was equal to the number of moves in each sermon. The same was true of the number of scriptural passages used; there was virtually the same number of passages read, within the context of the sermon text, as there were moves in each sermon. Often these passages were expository to some degree, primarily focusing on word studies and/or cultural/historical exegesis. There was very little use of example or illustration, and, when used, represented a personal narrative or tangential intrusion. Three of the sermons had moves which were really transitions from one idea to another. Each of these transitions also introduced new material into consciousness, which made them transition asides. Transitions are inappropriate according to Buttrick's structuralist theories, as are tangential asides. Every move had basically the same style, with no evidence of variance for different approaches to learning.

Endings

It is really more appropriate to label these modules of language as endings, since they did not conclude. Every ending presented new material, and in only one instance was the ending connected thematically to the introduction (or for that matter a theme introduced in one of the previous moves). Three of the five sermons had endings which consisted of readings from scripture. The length of the ending was consistent with Buttrick's homiletic; no ending was more than eight sentences in length.

Southwest

The sermons from the Southwest region represented a variation on the three-point sermon. Each of the five sermons consisted of an introduction, which was an extended illustration, usually ending with a question or proposition which served as the unifying theme for the entire sermon. In this way the sermons were variations on the classic three-point sermon since the introduction did not really "tell the audience what you are going to tell them," in the body of the sermon. This introduction (beginning is really a more accurate term) was always followed by three points, and in three of the five sermons the points were actually numbered. There was virtually no conclusion in any of the sermons; there were endings to three of the sermons, but they consisted of three to six sentences (two of the sermons had nothing which could be referred to as conclusion or ending) which were simple recitations of the three points made in the sermon.

Each of the sermons seemed to be a string of examples and/or illustrations. A thesis-like statement would be made somewhere in each move (generally the first sentence) and then supported, explained, expressed, and examined by the copious use of examples and illustrations. No move had less

than two illustrations and two examples, which is a number far exceeding what Buttrick considers necessary or appropriate.

The endings of the sermons (in those sermons which actually had endings) generally consisted of some sort of call to response: "Since God has done X for us, we should do Y for God;" or "We know what God wants us to do, for we have been given his teaching."

One might have to label these sermons as deductive-inductive sermon types; that is, a proposition or thesis was stated, and then illustration or example was used to support that proposition or thesis. Strictly logical support for the thesis was not put forward; it would seem instead that this preacher wanted people to experience the truth of the proposition for themselves through the hearing of the illustrations and examples.

One of the sermons was a single extended narrative; it was the retelling of a film entitled The Parable, which was first shown in the Protestant Pavilion of the New York World's Fair. After telling the film the preacher went back over each character in the film and explained their role or purpose, defending each explanation with more illustrations or examples. This would seem to be a sort of expository sermon, with the film being the material expositored.

Beginning

Each introduction was very long, ranging from thirty-one to sixty five sentences in length. On an average 75 percent of the length of each introduction was an extended narrative or a series of illustrations, which was concluded by a single sentence proposition or question, which then became the basic unifying theme of the sermon. The proposition or question was always the title of the sermon, and would be repeated several times throughout the sermon text. No hermeneutic was ever introduced, and one would be hard-put to argue that consciousness was focused in the introduction.

Development

Each sermon had only three moves, with each move ranging from eighteen to sixty-four sentences (the average move was thirty-eight sentences long). This is a smaller number of moves per sermon than Buttrick suggests; he recommends four to five moves, based on the theory that each move should be no longer than approximately four minutes, which he maintains is as long as anyone can listen to a single sustained idea. Each move consisted of a proposition, generally the first sentence of the move, which was then supported by a great number of examples and illustrations; no move had less than two examples and two illustrations, and one move had four illustrations and one example. Generally the moves followed some aspect of the proposition or question first put forth in the beginning, although at times one had to stretch to find the link between the particular illustration or example and the original proposition. Fully 75 percent of the number of sentences in each move was illustration or example; sometimes the sentences between illustrations seemed to be there only for the purpose of transition. There were a number of instances of asides, comments which seemed to be only peripherally related to the theme or illustration. Illustrations were often humorous, and showed evidence of having come from a sort of 500 Illustrations for Preaching type of book; the advantage of that is that there was virtually no use of personal narrative, which is counter-productive according to Buttrick's homiletic.

Ending

There were none in two of the sermons, and the conclusions (ending) found in the other three sermons examined were only three to six sentences in length, and accomplished none of the tasks that Buttrick says a conclusion should accomplish. They did not conclude, but often seemed to be Bible-babble or Jesus-talk, that is constant references to the name of Jesus or biblical

quotes and references that followed no coherent pattern or intention. One might suspect that such language was used with the intention of challenging people to some sort of action response, based on the perception of ultimate truth generated by reference to ultimate authorities such as Jesus or the Bible. Generally the ending was a rehashing of points made in the body of the sermon, a reflection of the classic three-point sermon model. In several instances new images were introduced in the conclusions, which Buttrick states is a grave error.

CHAPTER 5

An Analysis of Sermons from Churches Reporting a Decrease in Worship Attendance

We don't need the minister unless he has something to say that the Spirit has put in his heart to say. A minister who stands up and occupies twenty minutes of the worship hour has to say one thing for a sermon to be worthwhile - just one clear image, one proposition that you can take home with you. . . . The Gospel message is not easy, and ministers who try to make it more pleasant than it really is are doing a disservice.

Garrison Keillor, quoted in The Man From Lake Wobegon

There is a saying which states, "There is no coin so thin but what it does not have two sides." This is certainly true of a study which desires to explore the form of sermon and the possible relationship of that form with changing levels of worship attendance. Chapter 4 was concerned with the exploration of the structure of sermons that were preached in churches which had reported increased levels of worship attendance. Now this chapter must explore the other side of the coin and examine sermons preached in churches which have reported decreasing levels of worship attendance. As with the last chapter, the desire is to examine the beginning, development, and ending of a total of twenty-five sermons from five different preachers in an effort to discover if there is a consistent form throughout. If such a consistent form is uncovered, it might be described as normative and thus it would be appropriate to suggest that such a form should be labeled as "ineffective"; that is, that it does not demonstrate an ability to contribute to an increase in worship attendance.

The preachers and sermons selected for analysis in this chapter were selected based upon the criteria described in Chapter 2. The preachers selected represent one from each of three geographic regions: Southeast, Midwest, Northwest; and two representatives from the Northeast region. There

was no representative example available from the Southwest region, as explained in Chapter 1. Results of each regional analysis will be reported by geographic heading.

A formal discussion of the findings of this analysis, along with conclusions of the analysis of sermons from churches reporting an increase in worship attendance, is found in Chapter 6.

Northeast I

The examples from the Northeast region showed a very consistent pattern of form, and one which is very similar to Buttrick's ideal. Each of the sermons examined had an introduction, three to four moves, and a conclusion. Each individual sermon demonstrated a great deal of unity and cohesion; virtually every move related to the topic or theme first suggested in the introduction. Likewise the conclusion, which did in fact conclude, related to the original theme without introducing any new material. There was good use of examples and illustrations, with sixteen out of seventeen total moves containing either an example or an illustration. In only one instance was more than three examples used in a single move, which Buttrick holds as the maximum allowable in a single move. With but one exception, each sermon demonstrated a decreasing number of sentences per move throughout the sermon. That is, if the first move was forty sentences long, then each of the following moves would be shorter. Buttrick does not speak to this specifically, but a form analysis of the sermons of Harry Emerson Fosdick shows a similar pattern, which some scholars argue is the best method to deal with the so-called fatigue effect, which is the fact that the longer folks have to sit, the shorter is their attention span to any one specific concept or move.

Each sermon showed some digression into historical minutiae. Some time was spent in at least one move in each sermon discussing or exploring

some of the background of the scripture used, for example exactly how much a talent would be worth in today's market, or the use of spittle as a curative in first century Palestine. Buttrick would suggest that such digression is counter-productive and unnecessary.

An analysis of the form of these sermons revealed such a close parallel to Buttrick's theories that one is tempted to ask, "Was this preacher a student of David Buttrick?"

Beginning

The introductions tended to be very short, ranging from three to eight sentences in length. The shorter introductions (only one was eight sentences in length, and two of the introductions were only three sentences long) are at some variance with Buttrick's theories, since he maintains that it takes at least three sentences for a congregation to get in sync with the cadence and vocal style of the preacher, and thus become capable of forming meaning in consciousness. However, even within the shorter beginnings, the introduction did in fact introduce some topic or theme for consideration throughout the sermon, as well as suggest a particular hermeneutic.

Development

The number of moves per sermon fits in exactly with Buttrick's contention that people can only sustain attention for a three to four minute period, which means that a preacher should speak on only four or five moves in a twenty-minute sermon. Four of the sermons contained four moves each; the fifth sermon was identified as a communion meditation, and was considerably shorter than the other sermons. This suggests that less time was allowed for the spoken word, which necessitated fewer moves.

Each move contained an illustration or example, with examples generally being used in patterns of three (in one move only one example was used; in

another move two examples were used; and in one move five examples were strung together). At times the illustration was actually a recitation or re-telling of some of the biblical narrative which served as the basis for the sermon itself.

The length of the moves ranged from six to fifty-two sentences, with the average length per move being twenty-four sentences. As stated earlier, the length of each move corresponded with its respective position in the sermon itself; i.e., an earlier move would be longer than a move found later in the sermon.

Each move clearly demonstrated unity with the other moves and with the theme or topic first presented in the introduction. There were virtually no personal asides or other intrusions which would distract from consciousness. While one might argue that the time spent on "historical minutiae" was an intrusion, each explanation was demonstrably relevant to the theme of the sermon. Buttrick might argue for a more creative approach to this information which would help meaning form in consciousness in other than a strictly rational fashion, but the historical information was pertinent to the sermon as a whole.

Ending

The conclusions tended to be far shorter than what Buttrick advises; they ranged from two to seven sentences in length. Every conclusion was some re-speaking of the point of the sermon, either by paraphrasing the scripture upon which the sermon was based, or rephrasing the main point of the sermon. Buttrick would suggest that this forms a hermeneutical circle, of which he does not approve. However, he maintains that a conclusion must conclude, and that is exactly what each of the conclusions of the Northeast sample does accomplish.

Northeast II

The second set of sermons from the Northeast region were extremely long; the sermons averaged some thirty-two minutes in length (these examples came in tape form and were transcribed from the actual delivery of the sermon), with an average of eight moves per sermon. The sermons themselves lacked unity, movement, and organization, and there was nothing that could be called a conclusion or ending in any of the five sermons evaluated.

Each of the five sermons contained several different themes, both within the introduction and within the various moves. On three different occasions there were two different themes within a single move. Each of the sermons demonstrated a form similar to the other sermons; that is, they were always didactic, there was very little use of example or illustration, and contained within each of the sermons was a very long exposition of at least one scripture. Often there was a great deal of historical or cultural information concerning the scripture, and this information generally had little to do with what appeared to be the theme of the sermon or the particular moves in which the information was found. It was almost as if one had gathered information from a number of different sources on the scripture and just mixed all that information into one place with some flow of consciousness kind of interpretation. Which is precisely what investigation of sources revealed.

The basic structure of the sermons resembled the structure of the resource known as the Interpreter's Bible, which is a multi-volume set, much dated, which contains the wording of the scripture, an exposition of historical and grammatical information, and a sort of homiletic approach to the particular scripture.¹ The authors of the Interpreter's Bible very clearly separate these

¹ George Buttrick, et al., eds. Interpreter's Bible, 12 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1951-57).

three parts, while in the sermons representing Northeast II the preacher simply took information from each one of the three parts, mixed that information together with some flow of consciousness kind of commentary, made sure that regardless of the actual origin of the scripture it always related directly to Jesus, and called it a sermon. Comparison of sentences from the sermons with sentences from the Interpreter's Bible revealed exact or very similar construction; even the most liberal review board would label these as plagiarisms, for in no place was there any mention of source of information.

Beginning

The introductions averaged twelve sentences in length, which is in agreement with Buttrick's homiletic. However, the theme first produced in the introduction was never the theme followed throughout the sermon, and the introduction did not present a hermeneutic for consideration. Generally the introductions contained some illustration or example, presumably to produce a focused consciousness. Since the theme of the introduction was not followed throughout the development of the sermon, one cannot say that this was successful.

Development

Moves ranged in length from seventeen to forty-nine sentences, which may not seem very long when compared with the number of sentences found in other sermons. However, these sentences were often run-on sentences, connected with a variety of subordinating conjunctions. A timing of one particularly long and laborious sentence went on for sixty-two seconds, without a pause, breath, or any sign of a period.

The move following the introduction always took on a different theme from that introduced in the beginning. One could discern a kind of pattern; theme introduced in beginning, change to a different theme in the first move

which was then followed for two or three moves, and then there would be shift to one or more themes in the remaining moves.

There was very little use of example or illustration in any of the moves. If such was used, it was generally from the biblical tradition rather than the modern era. Examples or illustration attempting to reflect the modern era were often negative, such as we are like Babylon.

Ending

There was absolutely nothing that could be called an ending or a conclusion. The final move would always end with "Let us pray." The reported response of the typist who transcribed these sermons was "Huh?" The typist was certain she had missed something, so she repeatedly checked each of the tapes, turned them over, and played both sides through entirely (even when there was nothing but silence for forty-five minutes), all in an effort to discover the end of the sermon. It was not until both the typist and the author of this project had listened to the tapes several times that we were convinced that "Let us pray" was the ending to all the sermons.

Southeast

The sermons from the Southeast region demonstrated consistent unity of theme in all but one of the sermons subjected to analysis. That one sermon had four themes, which was equal to the number of moves in the sermon itself. Each sermon could be described as simplistic; the theme was presented in the introduction, and then each move dealt with some topic related to that theme. The first sentence of each move would present the topic, and then the rest of the move would support some comment made about the topic by use of example or illustration. The last sentence of each move would be some kind of challenge to the congregation to address the topic discussed in the move itself. The conclusions of the sermons ranged from two to thirty-one sentences in length,

and generally consisted of some basic recitation of the points made in all or most of the previous moves of the sermon itself. The very last sentence of each sermon was always, "Let us pray." One hopes that the prayer following the sermon did not become yet another recitation of the points made in the sermon.

The Southeast sermons followed a very common rule of rhetoric: in the introduction tell the audience what you are going to talk to them about; in the body talk to them about your subject; and then in the conclusion tell the audience what you have just told them. Certainly in the Southeast examples that lead to great unity in the sermon, although there is some question as to whether or not consciousness was ever really focused in the introduction and whether or not the congregation would accept the challenge presented in each move; there were so many challenges, it would seem hard to accept all of them presented in a single sermon.

Beginning

There was always an introduction, but no real consistency in length or specific use of the introduction; that is, one introduction was a story, another was a lengthy explication of a book by Robert Fulgham, and yet another was a misdirection, stating not so much what the theme of the sermon was, as what it was not. There was never any real hermeneutic introduced, and one might argue about whether or not consciousness was focused in the introductions.

Length of the introductions ranged from five to thirty sentences, with only two of the sermons having introduction lengths of eight to twelve sentences, which is Buttrick's suggestion. The theme was stated in the introduction in a very simple manner, and then each move addressed some issue or topic related to the central theme.

Development

There was no consistent pattern of number of moves per sermon; sermons ranged from three to six moves in length. Each move did basically the same thing: identified some topic related to the main theme to be discussed, and then addressed that issue. In nineteen of the total of twenty-three moves found in all the sermons, the topic for consideration was declared in the first sentence of the move, in a style very similar to a written essay, where each paragraph contains a topic sentence in the very beginning. One move was a tangential intrusion, introduced by the preacher himself who said, "Let me digress." And he did. One move was an attempt at transition, which Buttrick says should be unnecessary in a cohesive sermon. There was ample use of example and illustration, with eighteen of the total twenty-three moves containing either an example or an illustration, or a combination of the two. Nowhere did the preacher use more than three examples in a row, which again is similar to the strategies suggested by David Buttrick.

Ending

Each of the five sermons contained a conclusion, which was generally a repetition of the points made in the moves of the sermon. The conclusions ran from two to thirty-one sentences in length; there was a direct correlation between the number of moves in the sermon and the length of the conclusion. The more moves, the more points made, therefore the longer the conclusion necessary to reiterate each of the points. The last sentence of each conclusion was, "Let us pray," which might suggest that the conclusion did not really conclude, depending upon the material of the prayer. If the prayer was a pastoral prayer, it would seem that it might introduce new material to the context of the sermon. If the prayer is a repeat of some of the highlights of the sermon (as prayers following sermons so often do) then one might argue that the

conclusion is in fact a false conclusion, since the prayer could be considered as a move (or moves, depending upon the length of the prayer).

Midwest

The sermons from the Midwest sample suggested that this particular church is in some sort of trouble, and has been in trouble for some time. The sermon samples ranged over a three year period, and yet four of the five sermons analyzed indicated that the preacher was trying to address yet another issue in the congregation that was causing dissent.

The length of the sermons ranged from three to six moves, and there was no real consistency of structure; one sermon consisted of three moves, two sermons were four moves in length, and two sermons were six moves long.

Every sermon had a beginning and an ending (except one, which had no conclusion), but neither beginning nor ending followed any consistent pattern. Beginnings ranged in length from three to eight sentences, while conclusions were from one sentence to eight sentences long.

There was copious use of example and illustration; virtually every move had either an example or illustration, or both. Generally the examples or illustrations were utilized to support a point made didactically in the first sentence or two of the move itself. The illustrations and examples were almost used as forms of proof that the point made was true. This at first would seem to be an obvious use of example and illustration, but it is not Buttrick's use of those concepts. For Buttrick an example or illustration is utilized to bring into consciousness an idea or point; it is used not to prove something in a rational sense, but rather to imagine (to use Thomas Long's word) the idea in such a way as to bring the point into the experience of the listener.

The problem with using examples or illustrations as "proof" for a point is that oftentimes they can be misused in the same way that biblical texts are misused

to "prove" a point. An illustration or an example is a narrative retelling of some particular moment in history; it is not a universal response to a particular stimulus or situation.

None of the sermons demonstrated internal unity; often there were several points made in the same sermon, and in one sermon two points, mutually exclusive and contradictory, were made within one move of each other. Another sermon supposedly dealt with the Tower of Babel, but it seemed that the sermon itself was babble; the writer of this project was unable to come to any conclusions as to what the preacher was trying to say.

Beginning

The beginning (introduction, at least as defined by Buttrick, would not be an accurate term) of each of these sermons showed no hermeneutic, did not focus consciousness, were very simplistic and showed little relationship to the points made in the remainder of the text. There appeared to be some attempt to make a thesis like statement in the beginning, which would then be supported in the body of the sermon, but the thesis statement was often cloudy or trite, for example: "Our eyes can deceive us;" or "Trust in God's will."

Development

One sermon was three moves in length, two sermons were four moves in length, and the final two sermons were seven moves in length. Moves ranged from three to twenty-two sentences in length; there was no pattern as to length of moves, that is the early moves being consistently longer than later moves, or vice-versa.

Often the number of themes in the sermon equaled the number of moves in the sermon. One sermon, consisting of four moves, was a tour de force of historical trivia. Every move examined some aspect of Hebrew culture that related to the particular scripture upon which the sermon was based. There

was no cohesion in this historical journey; words or concepts were explored, and then it was on to the next word or concept or archeological evidence, with no sense of where the sermon was going or why.

The moves were filled with illustrations and examples. Every move had at least one illustration or example, and there was no variance as to how they were used. A statement was made in the first part of the move and then the illustration or example was used to prove the veracity of the statement.

Ending

The conclusions (again, ending is a far better term) bore little or no relationship to the material in the rest of the sermon. Every conclusion (with the exception of the sermon which had no conclusion; it just stopped) brought new information or ideas into consciousness; for example, one sermon began with the idea that we must all know what we believe, and the conclusion ended with the words, "We'll all die."

Conclusions ranged in length from zero to eight sentences in length. The average number of sentences in those sermons having a conclusion was five sentences, which Buttrick suggests is not enough to actually conclude the sermon and bring it to an appropriate halt. Clearly this is true in these examples.

Northwest

The sermons from the Northwest region demonstrated a curious lack of similarity. The samples from any other single region, while varying to a certain degree from sermon to sermon, still showed some similarity; one could read a particular group of sermons and while acknowledging differences from sermon to sermon, still see a certain similarity of style. This was not true for the sermon samples from the Northwest region; it was almost as though three different people had written the five sermons.

Two sermons were, by any criterion used, terrible. They lacked internal unity, there was no use of example or illustration, and there was precious little that one could even remotely identify as an introduction or a conclusion. There were at least three different themes evident in these sermons, the sentences were run-on sentences, and basic composition showed a lack of knowledge of basic grammar.

Two other sermons, while perhaps not being the greatest examples of homiletic proficiency available, were entirely different. There was an easily identifiable introduction and conclusion; clearly the writer had a grasp of complex English grammar; and with one or two exceptions, the sentences were of appropriate length. These sermons demonstrated internal unity, with the theme being presented in the introduction being maintained and explored through the remainder of the sermon. There was good use of example and illustration, and there was a clear and identifiable line of thought throughout the sermons.

The fifth sermon was delightful. It was impossible to explore it using the model developed from the theories of David Buttrick, for this sermon demonstrated an entirely different approach. This fifth sermon could only be labeled as narrative, using that term as defined by Eugene Lowry.² This sermon showed unity, organization, and movement, those three components identified in Chapter 2 as intrinsic to effective sermon composition. Likewise there was clearly a beginning, development, and an ending, aspects of sermon structure deemed necessary for effective sermon structure. This sermon was a story from beginning to end, and Buttrick's model of analysis simply was not applicable.

² Eugene Lowry, The Homiletical Plot (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980).

Because of the obvious stylistic differences evidenced in these five sermons, because of the wide range (from "bad" to "great") of reactions to these sermons, and because in no other sample was there such an obvious discrepancy, the author of this project had some concerns about the possibility of plagiarism by the Northwest representative. The two sermon samples judged to be inferior, selected by random drawing, were both dated 1987; the other three sermons samples were dated late 1988 and 1989. Because of the span of time represented by the sample (1987-89), and because of the number of books, journals, and sermon services from which one might plagiarize, it is impossible to state with certainty that these sermons, or at least some of them, are plagiarized.

However, an examination of date, title, scriptures, and theme from one particular sermon resource service revealed that one of the sermons from 1989 had exactly the same title, scripture, theme and approximate date as that sermon resource service. It is possible to suggest that this preacher simply realized the weakness of his preaching skills and did some study to improve his preaching. Likewise, with so many preachers now using the common lectionary as a guide to preaching, and understanding that there are only so many themes possible in any particular scripture, it is possible to say that this is mere coincidence. However, given the other evidence, i.e. the drastic stylistic differences, the fact that the title was exactly the same, and the date of apparent change in style, it is the conclusion of this author that at least two, and probably three, of the sermons in this sample were plagiarized, or were at least largely segments of somebody else's work that the Northwest representative modified for his own use.

Therefore it is of no value to discuss these sermons based on an analysis utilizing the model developed in Chapter 3. One purpose of this study is to

determine if there are normative styles of preaching within the United Church of Christ, and one can only guess as to the denominational affiliation of the person (or persons) from whom the material was plagiarized.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusions: A Comparison of Results

Great preaching is found when the God-called preacher and the inspired text meet in the miraculous chemistry of the preaching event.

R. Albert Mohler, Jr., quoted in Great Preaching 1989

One should always use the word "great" with care. After all, determining if something is great is ultimately a subjective decision. I may make a value judgement concerning the greatness of something, for which you would make a much different judgement.

Michael Duduit, Great Preaching 1989

The desire of this project was, through the process of form analysis, to discover a normative sermon form within selected sermons preached in the United Church of Christ. By comparing the form of sermon found in churches reporting increasing levels of worship attendance with the form of sermon found in churches with declining levels of attendance, it was hoped that some normative form for each group might be discovered. By comparing the two normative forms it was expected that some conclusions could be drawn concerning sermon form and church growth. Such a discovery, it was hoped, would lend direction to preachers within the United Church of Christ as to how better to form their sermons, and thus perhaps effect the thirty-year trend of declining membership within the United Church of Christ.

To that end, this project was a failure. The only consistencies found in both target samples (sermons from growing churches and sermons from declining churches) showed a virtual neglect for the three primary requisites of form. Likewise the three principle divisions of form advocated by teachers of homiletics for the past one hundred years were given a severe thrashing, even when all three divisions existed within a sermon. Sermon samples from both

target groups demonstrated very little utilization of the concepts of unity, organization, or movement, and there was little common use of beginning, development, or ending. Only three of the ten preachers examined had sermons that were consistently unified; that is, they stuck with one major theme throughout the entire sermon. Without unity there can be little organization as demonstrated in Chapter 2, and many of the ideas and examples presented in the text of the sermons drew attention away from the theme first expressed. Likewise movement, related to unity and organization, was virtually non-existent, since without unity or organization there can be little progress to a specific destination.

Similar problems were discovered with the usage the three principal divisions of form discussed in Chapter 2 and appropriated as a model for analysis in Chapter 3. While every sermon had what one could label as a beginning, it was often difficult to ascertain what the author was trying to achieve in that beginning. More often it seemed that it was a beginning only in the sense that at a particular moment somebody began to speak. In a like fashion every sermon could be said to have contained development, although what was being developed, and towards what end it was being developed, was often in question. While every sermon did have some part which could be labeled as beginning and development, what every sermon clearly did not have was an ending, unless one were to define ending as "to stop talking;" those sermons with identifiable endings often came not to a conclusion, but simply to a screeching halt, which is not the purpose of an ending as defined either by Buttrick or the scholars of the past century.

In an effort to better understand what conclusions can be drawn from the form analysis of this project, let us explore the specific requisites of unity, organization, and movement, as well as the three primary divisions of form.

The Three Primary Requisites of Form

Unity

As discussed in Chapter 2, unity refers to a central theme or guiding principle around which a sermon is formed. Only three out of the total of ten preachers who participated in this project demonstrated consistent unity in their sermons, which means that in each of the five sermons analyzed there was only one central theme or guiding principle throughout the entire sermon. Two of those three came from declining congregations; such a trend may suggest that unity of sermon form is not a factor related to church growth. The remaining seven representatives showed no consistent ability to maintain a single theme or principle in their sermons; each representative had one or two sermons which could be labeled as unified (only however, by using the most liberal definition and sometimes stretching concepts to the limit of their possible connections to a theme), but within the vast majority of these remaining sermons it was impossible to state in one or two sentences the primary thrust of the sermon.

This total disregard for this most basic of requisites of sermon form was a startling discovery. Virtually every teacher of speech, homiletics, and communications for the past one hundred years has emphasized that every sermon, speech, or oral presentation should seek to proclaim and expound upon a single primary idea.

Even if one were to disregard Lenski's very strict definition of unity, which states that looking at an argument from various sides, or exploring a number of subheadings under a single theme does not demonstrate a sermon with unity (see Chapter 2), still one cannot say that these sermons demonstrated unity. Statistically speaking, 70 percent of the sermons analyzed in this project did not

even pass the first basic test of effective sermon construction, a single identifiable theme or guiding principle.

In only fifteen sermons was there a single identifiable theme or guiding principle which was followed throughout the development of the entire sermon. In the remaining thirty-five sermons the number of themes evidenced in any single sermon ranged from three to ten. Churches experiencing increasing levels of worship attendance showed less unity in sermons than those churches experiencing declining levels of worship attendance, which suggests one of three tentative conclusions related specifically to this project:

1. Despite the teaching and research of the past one hundred years, unity is not required for the construction of an effective sermon, using the definition of effective found in Chapter 1.
2. People can in fact comprehend sermons that demonstrate little thematic unity; given the fact that most of the sermons which demonstrated unity came from churches reporting declining levels of worship attendance, one might conclude that audiences prefer sermons that demonstrate little thematic unity.
3. Preaching, specifically as it relates to sermon form, has much less to do with church growth than anecdotal evidence and current church growth literature would suggest.

Organization

Once again referring to Chapter 2, organization in a sermon refers to the fact that all the various parts of the sermon are arranged in such a manner as to direct the mind of the listener to a single point or principle. Organization and unity are thus closely related, and while it is possible to have a unified sermon without organization, it is not possible to have an organized sermon without unity (remembering that organization does not refer simply to order). Since

seven out of ten sermons demonstrated no unity, those same seven out of ten sermons demonstrated little or no organization. Because of the lack of a specific theme or principle, there was no specific destination for the sermon; in sermon form it is impossible to be organized if you do not know where you are going.

If a sermon has several themes, it is impossible to organize around a central idea or guiding principle except in the most general of fashions. Referring to the example of Ps. 1:1 found in Chapter 2, just because every move or new theme has the word happy in it does not mean that the sermon is organized or demonstrates unity. It would seem that many of the preachers utilized for analysis in this project would disagree; for them it appears that if one were to preach on Ps. 1:1 - "Happy is the one" - then any example or illustration or idea which has the word happy in it must be related to the central theme of happiness. So one can then talk about happy children, happy dogs, Happy Meals, happy versus sad, slap happy, happy-go-lucky . . . and label it a sermon.

Every scholar of the past century seems to disagree. Again it seems that there are several possible conclusions one can draw from this discovery. First is that complaint so often heard of seminary professors, that they live in an Ivory Tower and do not understand the realities of parish life, which translated means that organization is not necessary for effective sermon form. A second conclusion might be that the lives of so many people are so organized in day to day life that a twenty minute dose of confusion is a nice change. The third possible inference is related to number 3 above, and that is there are other factors in sermons than organization that cause people to report that good preaching is an important ingredient of church growth.

Movement

Movement, or the sequential progression towards a desired goal, requires a destination; there cannot be movement (in a homiletic sense) unless there is, as Fosdick has said, "a target in sight." The analysis of movement should disclose some strategy of arrangement that is designed to achieve the most satisfactory cumulative effect. But because the sermons analyzed in this project showed no consistent target, these sermons lacked any coherent and consistent sense of movement.

Movement, as it is defined in homiletics, should take the listener to a prescribed goal. While one could say that all of the sermons analyzed did in fact move, it was not a movement like a river, working its way constantly towards the ocean, a goal, but rather movement like a fly, which zips from here to there and back again with no rhyme or reason (except perhaps known to the fly!).

Certainly some of the sermons used in this project did have some sense of direction, and therefore movement, but as a whole there was no sense that the preachers had answered those questions suggested by Craddock, "What do I want to say?" and "What do I want to do?" A move, or even a series of moves, might progress towards some conclusion or understanding or experience, but very few of the sermons showed consistent progression of thought throughout. Movement has to do with a bird's eye view, a comprehension of the total picture; thus even with sermons that progress in a narrative style, or sermons that present a series of poetic images, it can be said to that the sermon has movement because all the parts work together to get the listener to a particular point. For the most part, the target aimed for in many of the sermons utilized in this project simply seemed to be the conclusion of twenty minutes (or more).

There simply was no consistent form of movement demonstrated throughout either sample group of sermons; in fact, there seemed to be little understanding of the concept of movement as defined in this project. These results again lead us to a couple of possible conclusions: (1) movement is not necessary for effective preaching; or (2) the ability of an audience to listen to an extended oral presentation has reached the point where people simply do not listen in more than three or four minute sound bites, as suggested by Buttrick in his homiletic, and therefore consistent movement throughout a sermon is not necessary. People tune in for only parts of the sermon, and either they get the message in those sound bites or they do not get the message at all. Movement is more necessary within those three or four minutes than throughout the entirety of the sermon. This suggests that in a twenty minute sermon, it may be that any given individual only hears a very small part of the entire sermon, and thus movement throughout the entire sermon to a specific goal is not necessary. It is rather more important that the preacher supply short, concise bits of thought that contain the kernal of the message instead of developing a twenty minute process of thought, explanation, or proof. Such an idea certainly supports Buttrick's contention (and the evidence found in political campaigns and advertising on television) that folks only hear in small bits, and that the object of a move is to develop a thought completely and quickly. The difference is that Buttrick holds that those individual moves must be tied together to a larger plan and goal. This study points to a trend which suggests that such overall sermonic unity is not necessary for effective preaching.

The Three Principal Divisions of Form

Just as there are three primary requisites to form, there are three principal divisions of form: beginning, development, and ending. These three divisions were discussed in depth in Chapter 2, and a model of analysis, based

on the theories of David Buttrick, was developed in Chapter 3. The desire of the analysis was to seek some commonalities in the form of beginning, development, and ending in an effort to provide some models for effective preaching.

There was very little in the way of consistency of form of beginning, development, and ending among the fifty sermons submitted to analysis. Virtually every sermon had a beginning, as well as a section that could be labeled as development, but not every sermon had an ending (other than perhaps to simply stop). Length for all these divisions varied greatly, among both growing and declining churches.

It is, however, in this discussion of beginning, development, and ending that we can first begin to see some of the important differences in form between those sermons preached in growing churches versus those sermons preached in declining churches. Every sermon in the growing churches did have sections that could be clearly labeled as beginning, development, and ending, whereas that was not always true for the sermons preached in declining churches. Sermons preached in declining churches all had a beginning and a section of development, but fifty percent of the sermons had no ending, at least as defined in this project, other than the words, "Let us pray." One could refer to this type of ending as a drop-off ending, since it is almost as though one simply left off the conclusion and just stopped the sermon.

By exploring each of the divisions separately we can delineate more clearly the differences between the two target groups.

Beginning

The beginnings of the sermons preached in growing churches showed an astounding similarity in terms of length. Fully 80 percent of the sermons analyzed had beginning sections that averaged twelve sentences in length.

Buttrick of course advocates that the introduction range in length from eight to twelve sentences, and the fact that a vast majority of sermons preached in growing churches were in that range lends credence to his proposition concerning length of introduction.

Within the sermons from declining churches, the length of the beginnings fell into two groupings: the first group was consistently lower than eight sentences, and the second group had an average length of more than thirteen sentences. Thus the beginning sections found in sermons preached in churches with declining levels of worship attendance were not within the range advocated by Buttrick. Since there are so many discrete elements that go into sermon form itself, it would not be appropriate to state that the optimal length for the beginning of a sermon is always between eight and twelve sentences. However, this study does show a trend which suggests that such a length may have advantages.

A correlation was found in the length of the beginning, but no such correlation was found in terms of what the beginning actually accomplished. Buttrick holds that an introduction should focus congregational consciousness with a hermeneutical orientation. Only ten percent of all the sermons used for analysis demonstrated that the beginning established a hermeneutic; in the other ninety percent of the sermons no hermeneutic was established in the beginning. This is perhaps related to the lack of unity found in the sermons; a single hermeneutic might have given the preacher more concrete direction. The use of only one hermeneutic would have forced the various preachers to be more particular and stringent in their use of examples and illustrations, as well as providing a single line of sight for sermon development. Instead, through the use of several hermeneutics throughout the entire sermon, the audience was never able to ascertain exactly which perspective the preacher was trying

to establish. Such a lack of perspective might of course increase confusion, and contribute to the lack of unity, movement, and organization discussed above. However, if it is true that unity is not necessary for effective sermon form, then a single perspective is not necessary. The introductions did not provide focus, and in fact seemed only tangentially related to the development which followed.

Buttrick argues that the beginning should not give away the structure of the sermon; that was not a problem for the sermons used in this study. Given the oftentimes peripheral relationship between introduction and development, it would have been difficult to establish some parallel construction that would have given away the structure of the sermon. A number of the introductions consisted of types which Buttrick feels are antithetical to good sermon form, such as the personal narrative, the step-down introduction, and humor. This study shows a trend that suggests that, since these types of introductions were found in both growing and declining churches, those types of introductions have no real impact, positive or negative, on sermon effectiveness.

Development

Virtually all of the sermons fell into the three to seven move range, on the average. This information really does not tell us anything, however, since the actual length of each move varied to such a great extent. It is not even helpful to count the number of sentences per move, since actual sentence length varies so much from preacher to preacher, ranging from simple sentences to complex sentences to run-on sentences. Counting words might be more helpful, but that still would not take into account the actual length for oral delivery. Buttrick's concern, based on current understandings of the attention span of audiences, has to do with the ability of a listener to remain focused on a single idea, and that is why he advocates only four or five moves per sermon; but it is not just

length of moves vis a vis number of words or sentences, but length of move as regards the time it takes for oral delivery. This project was not really structured in such a fashion as to deal with the question of length of move in an adequate fashion. One way to more effectively judge length of move, in an effort to determine if there is a qualitative difference between sermons preached in growing and declining churches, might be to actually tape record sermons, transcribe them and determine the number of moves, where they begin and end, and then use a stopwatch to actually time the oral delivery from the tape. Such an approach might give us a more complete understanding of length of move and its relationship to sermons preached in declining and growing churches.

Moves, according to Buttrick, should be composed of subordinate gambits of thought and be constructed in such a way as to form a pattern of understanding in consciousness. To a large degree, the moves of the sermons in both target groups achieved those goals. The problem was less in the moves themselves as individual units, and more in the relationship between moves.

There were a large number of examples and illustrations used in the sermons from both target samples, so it does not appear that the use of example or illustration is an issue per se. What may be of more importance is to distinguish how those examples and illustrations were used within the context of the move in particular and the sermon in general. That question is beyond the scope of this project, but it is a question that deserves some serious study, as there may be an important qualitative relationship between effective preaching and the use of example and illustration.

One important difference relative to the use of types of examples and illustrations had to do with personal narrative. Buttrick is strongly against the use of personal narrative, yet four out of the five preachers from growing

churches consistently used personal narrative in their sermons. Not so for the sermons from declining churches; there was very little use of personal narrative in those sermons. It is also interesting to note that there were a large number of personal asides in the sermons from growing churches, and very few in the sermons from declining churches. Such evidence suggests that Buttrick is wrong about the deleterious effect of personal narrative; this project suggests that there is a definite relationship between personal narrative, whether example or aside, and effective preaching.

A second inference about example and illustration has to do with the use of historical minutiae. The sermons from declining churches demonstrated considerable use of extended discussions about word usage or cultural/historical events from biblical times; there was very little such material in sermons from growing churches. This suggests that Fosdick's comment concerning the relative importance of the Jebusites to the person in the pew still holds true in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Ending

Perhaps one of the most significant observations concerning difference in form from the sermons in this project is the presence or absence of an ending. While one could not judge the endings of either sample group to be particularly strong, at least those sermons from the growing churches had, for the most part, some portion of the sermon which could be identified as ending. This was not always true for the sermons preached in churches reporting declining levels of worship attendance. Ninety-two percent of the sermons preached in growing churches had an ending. Only seventy percent of the sermons from churches with decreasing levels of worship attendance demonstrated something that could be labeled as ending.

The endings found in sermons from growing churches tended to be simplistic; that is they either reiterated points made in the sermon, rephrased scripture, or were a call to conversion or action. The endings found in the sample from declining churches (where endings were evident), tended to drop off into a formula; the words "Let us pray" ended fully 50 percent of those sermons with endings.

Endings in both samples rarely did as Buttrick's homiletic suggests; he believes an ending should conclude a sermon. That is, by the time one reaches the ending, a single idea should have been planted firmly in consciousness, and the ending should seal that idea. This notion is not so different from what scholars of the past century have been saying, which is that an ending should function as a means of relating the truth of the sermon helpfully and lastingly to life as the audience faces it.

Once again referring back to our discussion on unity and organization, since it was a rare sermon which had a single point or theme, it is impossible for the ending to function as Buttrick suggests it should, which is to cement an idea in place. With no single idea to focus upon, endings in the sermons analyzed are often either simply recitations of points made in the sermon or a sort of hermeneutical circle whereby the ending was connected to the beginning (kind of like ending up where you first started, which defeats any notion of movement).

Therefore the most one can say about the differences between sermons in growing churches and sermons in declining churches, relative to endings, is that at least the growing church sermons always had them, however weak those endings might have been.

Observations for Future Consideration

There are many questions left unanswered by this project; in fact, the results of the project raise some questions not considered in the formation of the thesis and methodology. It was hoped that, through form analysis of selected sermons preached in the United Church of Christ, some commonalities of form might be found. In turn, these commonalities could then be utilized as a model for effective sermon form. This project did not reveal many such commonalities, except to note that in effective sermon form there is always a beginning, a development, and an ending, which teachers of homiletics have been advocating for the past century. Relative to those requisites, it was discovered that for these sermons, an effective introduction length seems to be twelve sentences.

Likewise it would seem that at this time in the history of homiletic development, the inclusion of personal narrative does have value. The sermons from growing churches used in this study all demonstrated use of personal narrative, a trend which deserves some further, more definitive exploration. This observation is certainly supported by anecdotal evidence, although nowhere do teachers of homiletics openly advocate such inclusion; some in fact, like Buttrick, are very much against it.

One major definition utilized in this project was always in question: that effective preaching was related to increase in worship attendance. For the purposes of this project a suitable, simplistic definition had to be found, but no one, including the author of this project, really limits the definition of "effective" preaching to an increase in worship attendance. For example, let us say that there are one hundred people in worship on a given Sunday morning. The preacher delivers the sermon, and ninety-nine people fall asleep. But one person listens with rapt attention; it is as though the preacher had seen into

his/her personal life and was speaking a message directly to him/her. After worship, this person hugs the preacher, says "Thank you," and leaves the church with new hope and direction. Can anyone doubt the effectiveness of such a sermon?

In a similar vein one can look at the preaching of Paul, particularly as it is described in the book of Acts. Paul is described as being in Athens, and preaching on the Areopagus; after his preaching it is written, "When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed. . . But some of them joined him."¹ This kind of response is recorded throughout the biblical literature, yet none would doubt the effectiveness of the preaching of Paul.

It may be that ultimately what the worshipper brings to the sermon is of more value than what the preacher brings to the same moment. Every preacher has had the experience of giving a sermon, and afterwards having a parishoner come up and effuse about ideas and images in the sermon that the preacher never intended! But for some reason, at that moment, the listener heard something in the sermon that impacted them in a positive fashion. Deane A. Kemper has some cogent remarks relative to that idea.

After twenty-five years in ministry in which I have both preached and taught preaching, one of my firmest convictions is that the work of the Holy Spirit in the preaching moment is directed far more at hearers than preachers. In reading the scriptures, I find considerably more incidence of Spirit-filled hearers than Spirit-filled preachers. Like all pastors, I have heard parishoners speak of the tremendous impact of a sermon on their lives when I knew for a fact that the sermon that Sunday was a turkey. Nor is it unusual for the layfolk to draw meaning from a sermon that I hadn't intended. . . We preach faithfully Sunday after Sunday, year after year, and it is when the worshippers enters the sanctuary ready to hear

¹ Acts 17:22-32.

that God's word breaks through.²

Garrison Keillor might be right when he states that the preacher needs to give only one image or one idea, for the twenty minutes to be worthwhile.

It is difficult to evaluate a sermon outside of the context of worship itself. The Proclaimed Word is, after all, only about one-third of the entire worship experience (at least in white, mainline protestant worship). As such it is only one "move" in a series of moves that comprise worship. Music, liturgy, prayer, the beauty of the surroundings, the gathered community of faith sharing together in worship. . . all of these are elements that actually propel consciousness towards God, which is the ultimate aim not just of the sermon, but of the worship itself. Perhaps it is inappropriate to evaluate the sermon at all outside of the context of worship; to do so may be akin to pulling one act out of a play and trying to evaluate that one act. Parts are missing, the context may be be-fuddled; there are elements integral to that one act that are simply not directly evident in the experience of the one act itself.

Likewise it may be impossible to evaluate a sermon outside of the relationship between the pastor and the parish. One series of sermons in this study seemed to deal primarily with problems in the parish. Using the methodology developed for this project, those sermons were judged to be very weak and ineffective. Yet to the people actually in that situation, those sermons may have been profound and life altering. Fred Craddock once offered the opinion that most of us will never know of the greatest preachers, for they are back in the hills simply speaking the word of hope and truth to their people. They have no large television audiences or magnificent structures, they just help people deal with the hurt and pain of everyday life, sharing joy and sorrow

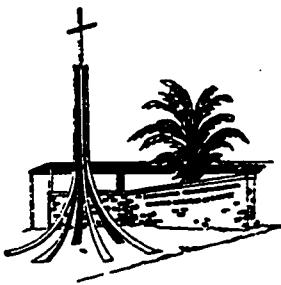
² Deane A. Kemper, "The Third Sunday After Epiphany," Word and Witness, 26 Jan. 1992, 3.

and the promise of God's love through all times. Fosdick believed that preaching was pastoral care to a mass audience, and this demands a certain relationship between the preacher and the person in the pew.

Obviously there are many more questions that need study, and those called to preach should never cease in their efforts to improve their ability to communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the most effective and helpful manner possible. We will probably never get it exactly right for every person at every moment, but by working and studying we can improve our ability to effect the lives of others through the proclamation of the Word.

SCOTTSDALE CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
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APPENDIX A

Off: 946-2900
 Res: 945-3446



February 18, 1991

The Rev. *****
 First Church
 Anytown, USA

Dear Rev. *****,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in the research for my doctoral project. I really appreciate your cooperation, and hopefully the research will lead to information that will benefit the United Church of Christ.

As I explained during our conversation, I am analyzing the form of sermons preached in the UCC to seek to discover if there is a particular form that we can call "normative" for preachers in our denomination. I am looking at many churches from various conferences, and it will be interesting to see if there are regional differences as well as an overall similarity.

Please send me copies of sermons preached during the following periods:

1987 - January, April, November (one each month)
 1988 - February, March, October (one each month)
 1989 - May, July, September (one each month)

Please do not send sermons for special occasions or "high" Sundays (Easter, Christmas, etc.).

The sermons you send me will be utilized for form analysis, and I promise not to steal them and preach them from my pulpit!

Again, many thanks for your time and contribution. I look forward to receiving your sermons within the next month.

Sincerely,

Kevin C. Brown

KEVIN C. BROWN





SCOTSDALE CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
4425N. GRANITE REEF ROAD, SCOTSDALE, ARIZONA 85251
APPENDIX B

Off: 946-2900
 Res: 945-3446

May 20, 1991

The Rev. *****
 First Church
 Anytown, USA

Dear Rev. *****,

This is to follow up on our telephone conversation and my correspondance in February concerning your assistance in my D.Min. project. As you may remember, when we spoke on the phone you indicated your willingness to supply me with sermons for form analysis.

I have not yet received any sermons from you, and if you are no longer willing to participate in this project, I would appreciate some notification so that I may seek other subjects. I realize that there is much to do in the life of a pastor, and it may be that time constraints no longer make it convenient for you to participate.

If you are still willing to assist me, I would appreciate receiving copies of sermons from the following dates:

1987 - January, April, November (one each month)
 1988 - February, March, October (one each month)
 1989 - May, July, September (one each month)

Many thanks for your willingness to participate; all the sermons you submit will be used for form analysis and nothing else (although I can't promise I won't steal a goo dillustration or two!). Take care, and I hope the Summer brings yu some time for rest and relaxation.

Sincerely,

Kevin C. Brown

KEVIN C. BROWN



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